







POLAND

Marta

Where Sister  
Cecilia Was  
Born

Here Sister Cecilia  
Went to School

The Widow  
Valera

Ludo and Orsula

River Danube

THE  
FLIGHT OF  
SISTER CECILIA

HUNGARY

Norman Nisbet













THE DELIVERANCE OF  
SISTER CECILIA



# THE DELIVERANCE OF SISTER CECILIA

*by*

SISTER CECILIA

*as told to*

WILLIAM BRINKLEY



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## DEDICATION

*To the Veronikas and Dominiks, the Sister Margitas, the Anickas and Rosas and Julkas, the Martas and Orsulas and Ludos and Valeras, the Father Janos and Filips, the Big Jo Jos . . . to all the brave people of the underground who stake their lives, and some lose them, to help the fleeing.*

## NOTES

*For the protection of those who have not crossed the dike this book has been checked by security sources.*

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*The letter 'c' in Czech proper names is pronounced as 'tz', and the letter 'j' as 'y'.*

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*Part One*

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I TAKE OFF MY -NUN'S HABIT

# I

## FOUR CARS OF POLICE COME FOR ME

I FEEL someone shaking me hard enough to hurt, and I wake up in my room in the children's hospital in Bratislava and see it is a sister, all pale and quivering. "Jesus Mary Joseph!" she wails. "Sister! Oh, Sister! Four policemen are waiting for you downstairs, and four cars more of them outside! Mother Superior says to take a blanket with you because it will be cold at the police station."

For one black moment I think I am having a nightmare, but then I reach out and touch the sister, and she is flesh and blood.

"Sister," I say, "I don't intend to go to the police station."

I get up and dress fast and run up into the attic of the hospital. I look around for a place to hide, but there are only rafters and old mattresses. Frantically I climb out through a window on to a little veranda on the roof. I climb on my hands and knees up the roof and try to hide behind the chimney. I sit down behind the chimney, which was once red but is now getting black, and try to think. I am dizzy and in such terror I think I may faint and roll off the roof.

### *Four Cars of Police Come for Me*

Then I look down and see on the street all the green police cars and the policemen in green uniforms all around the hospital and many passers-by stopping to see what is going on. Suddenly I think, "Holy Saviour, the police will see me in my white nursing habit against this black chimney." I get up to go back down. As I go, lurching, my foot loosens a piece of the roof-tile and it starts sliding down. The tile tumbles down the roof, down, down, towards the edge. I wait, holding my breath in horror, for it to clatter on to the street and call their eyes up to me.

The tile catches on the edge of the roof and drops into the roof gutter. I close my eyes a moment in prayer and dizziness.

I crawl back down the roof to the veranda and climb back through the window into the attic. So I go through the attic and down to my room. Five sisters are standing there now like white geese in a panic.

"Come down!" they say. "Come downstairs, Sister! The police are getting restless!"

And I think, thank the Saviour the Communist police still have enough character not to come up to a nun's room. The frenzy comes up in me, black waves of panic. Between the waves I try desperately to think of a way round the police.

Then I remember something.

I go to my suitcase and get out a dress a woman whose child was at the hospital gave me in case such a day as this should come. A dark blue dress with white polka dots and a blue kerchief for the head.

I grab out the dress and the kerchief. I run up to the attic again. I start to take off my veil.

## *I Take Off My Nun's Habit*

But then my hands stop, as if held back by something outside me.

In twenty-one years, since my holy vows, I have not worn anything but a nun's habit. I think, "If I go in my habit, they will catch me. But if I go in ordinary clothes and am caught anyway, what a shameful thing for a nun to be dragged through the street in civilian dress—it is just what they would want. If I am to be caught, I want to go as a nun, proudly."

Then I stop thinking and I pray. Usually I pray through Saint Joseph, who is my best friend and, of all the saints, the one I can talk to best. But this is too big even for Saint Joseph. So I go direct and I pray, "Holy Saviour, what shall I do? Tell me."

And before I even realise what I am doing, I do it.

I lift off my veil.

I unhook my collar.

I untie my bonnet.

I untie my forehead cover.

I unhook my cloak.

I take off my belt with its rosary and cross.

I take off my dress.

I put them all under an old mattress. Then, my hands racing, I put on the blue polka-dot dress and around my head tie the blue kerchief. I run back down.

From my room I grab up two things only to take with me—a stained picture of Saint Joseph I have had since a girl; and a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help which I have had from the time I became a nun. I stick them inside the dress and go out into the corridor.

A sister is coming down the corridor carrying a small



### *Four Cars of Police Come for Me*

baby. "Give me that baby," I say, thinking it will hide me better as I go now.

"Give you the baby!" she says, astonished and holding on to it. "I can't give you the baby. The doctor's waiting to examine it. I can't give it to you! How would we get the baby back? We have to get the baby back, Sister," she says, very logically.

I turn quickly from her. There is no time to argue. I open a cleaning cupboard and grab some old rags to carry so as to look like a maid from the hospital, and anyhow I am dirty from the roof. I walk downstairs. I go out of a side door and I walk through the line of police.

Now, after helping other people hide and escape across the border, I am myself the one in hiding. For the next four months I live like an animal, fleeing from hole to hole. When I made it at last across the border, on a night of darkness and fear, it was 10 January 1912. Surely it is the most terrible of all lives, hiding out in a Communist country, and possibly especially for a nun, Saint Joseph forgive my pride.



*Part Two*

---

AN UNUSUAL PREPARATION FOR  
THE UNDERGROUND

## 2

### THE SOIL AND THE SAINTS

FOR an agent of the underground Holy Saviour picked a strange one in me. I was born in a village in Slovakia so small you could count the houses. I was named after Saint Cecilia, the early Christian girl whose head was cut off by the Romans. My father was a poor peasant. His family was everything to him. He loved children. He kept them coming just about every fourteen months apart on the average, in order to have new ones all the time. I arrived fourth—Maria, Irena, Edo, then Cecilia. Finally there were eleven of us, nine of them girls.

Our house was built of brown dirt and with dirt floors. The way you made the house was to mix mud and straw and pound wet into wooden forms. When it hardened you took the forms away. And you had a house. The roof was red tile baked in a nearby town. Every spring my father painted the house with whitewash. The house had four rooms and a kitchen, and the large number of children made it necessary to have beds in each room except the kitchen, where we ate. We slept on straw with sheets over it. The straw was changed once a month and smelled fresh and

## *The Soil and the Saints*

nice, and the covers were filled with down from our own geese.

Everything we had was from the farm. Our clothes came from the flax which my father grew for this purpose. You put the flax in water for six weeks. Then you let it dry. Then you beat it. What you had left was linen threads. You gave these threads to the weaver who called. He made cloth from them. He took so many yards of the cloth for his pay and gave you the rest. And you had clothes. Our food was likewise direct. When we got up in the morning, we would go to the barn, then, when the milk came from our four cows, dip cups of it from the pail and drink with a hunk of heavy black bread from the big round loaves which my mother made in her brick oven, which burned wood. That was breakfast. At noon we had soup and potato pancakes. For supper more potatoes, pea beans, and sauerkraut.

I didn't know it until people told me later that I had led a hard life. I still don't know it. We were all very happy, and we never knew what it meant to need a doctor.

He was happy, the farmer in Slovakia, because of what the land meant to him. The meaning of the land to the Slovak peasant is sometimes hard for other people to understand. His land is like the blood in his body. Just like the flesh on his bones and the blood in his body, his land has been handed down to him from his family over dozens of generations and hundreds of years. My father could look at his soil and say, "My own people turned this earth five hundred years ago." It is this that makes the Slovak peasant close to the soil far beyond the living that it gives him, so that to take any of it from him is like digging out his heart and taking it.

### *An Unusual Preparation for the Underground*

The farm handed down to my father was rich black loam, with a richness and wetness which clung to your hand when you thrust it into it. My father's fifty acres were in ten pieces of land in different places from 1,000 yards up to two miles from our house in the village. He would farm one piece of it in wheat, another piece in potatoes, another in sugar-beet, another in flax, another in one-half oats and one-half barley, another in grapes for the wine, others in orchards of prunes and apples and walnuts and pears, and another he would have in pasture for the geese. He would go to the land when the sun went to it, at six in the morning, or four in the summer, and stay there until the sun left it, too. The farm *was* my father, and he was happy. Where the father and mother are happy, happy are the children—no matter how hard the work.

The work was hard, but since no one ever told us this, we were happy. Everyone in the family helped out on the farm, another advantage of having eleven children. The child six years old started by taking a small bunch of geese to the pasture and watching them all day while they ate, then bringing them home in the evening. As you got older, you were given a larger and larger bunch of geese to watch until you had fifty or sixty to look after. Meantime you handed the smaller bunches of geese down to your younger sisters. Then, at about ten or eleven years old, you no longer watched the geese, but went to work in the fields yourself.

Geese were important—they were something to eat and something to peel goose feathers from to fill cushions and coverlets. When I think of my early life, I think of geese more than anything else. To this day I love the geese, and

## *The Soil and the Saints*

wherever I go, I want to buy a wee little gosling and keep wherever I am, which astonishes people if I happen to be staying in their house in a city. For they say, "What about when it grows up and is honking in the house?" I say don't worry so much about the future.

Watching geese was not lonely. It was a time for seeing all the other little girls from the village, for each took her own small bunch of geese to the pasture. The little girls could talk with each other and even play, but they were supposed to keep their eye on their own flock of geese to make sure they didn't get mixed up with their neighbours' geese. Your own geese were marked with a brand on their feet—for ours it was a small •V cut into the web of the goose's right foot—but if they got mixed up it was still sometimes hard to separate them. So you were supposed to watch closely to see that they didn't get mixed up. And also to see that they didn't get into the corn-fields and start eating straight from the growing stalks, but stayed in the pasture and ate from the ground.

So you could play, but not so much that you didn't keep your eye on your geese. Once at harvest time I was bad and went off to play with the other little girls instead of keeping my eyes on my geese. When I came back, my geese were all gone. I went to look and found them—in another farmer's wheat-field. About twenty-five of them were having a big dinner off the farmer's wheat. And the farmer was there going after them. Usually, if a farmer caught a foreign goose in his field, he locked the goose up until the owner came and bailed it out, with money. The farmer was in the process of doing just this, going after my geese eagerly and calling his two sons to help him, there were so many. I

### *An Unusual Preparation for the Underground*

started to cry so loudly that my cries carried across the field and my *Tato*, Daddy, came running. He and the other farmer almost got into a fight, shouting and waving their arms violently and following the excited geese across the fields, and me, very terrified, going right after them. Suddenly, when we had crossed one field, *Tato* stopped and raised his hand.

"We're on Government property," he said, and gave a wide grin. "You can't fight on Government property." The man stood there a moment or two, furious and disgusted, then spat and stalked off, and *Tato* didn't have to bail his geese out.

Watching geese was fun. All day long you could stay in the fields and play with the other little girls. Sometimes, though, the big goose would decide she wanted to go home before it was time. She would start off honking loudly, and all the little goslings would follow her. This meant you had to go home with them and couldn't play. Once when we were all playing and having fun, my big goose started for home. I got mad at her and picked up a big stick and hit her over the head. She fell down and lay there. I didn't mean to hit her so hard, I picked her up and carried her home in my arms, crying all the way, and told *Mamicka*, my mother, "She died."

*Mamicka* was very suspicious. "How could she die?" she said. "She isn't even blown up like a sick goose."

"She just fell over and died," I said, crying loudly, but not mentioning the stick. Then the gypsies got the goose. Anything that died went to the gypsies. I felt bad about that goose for a long time.

I was a very bad girl, and especially as a goose-watcher.



### *The Soil and the Saints*

In Slovakia the children like to eat poppy seeds, which taste real sweet and are grown to put in the *kolache*—which is a pastry rolled with walnuts in it and sprinkled with poppy seed. One day when a bunch of us were watching our geese, one of the other little girls had an idea.

"We'll watch your geese and you go get some poppy seeds. We'll watch for the watchman."

This was a man who watched the fields for the owner. So I went off into this field which did not belong to my father and started gathering poppy heads, sampling some seeds from them as I went. Suddenly, from behind some big corn, the watchman appeared, just as if he had fallen down from the skies.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Looking," I said.

"H-m-m, looking," he said. "Let me see your teeth."

I opened my mouth a little.

"Just as I thought," said the watchman. "I see you have 'poppy-seed teeth.' "

He looked down at where I was holding my apron up against me.

"And what might you have there?"

And he looked. "Just as I thought. A whole apronful of poppy heads!"

I was terrified. "Uncle," I said, which is what the children call the grown man in Slovakia, in respect, "I will pray to Our Father in heaven for you if you please let me go."

I got down on my knees in the field and put my hands together.

"Oh Father in heaven," I said, "bless the watchman, the dear watchman."

## *An Unusual Preparation for the Underground*

"Go ahead and pray," the watchman said. "You ought to pray.

I must have prayed hard because he let me go. He even let me pick up the poppy heads, which had spilled from my apron when I put my hands together, and take them with me.

By the time I was seven and went to my first confession, I must have had a lot to go for. To make sure we remembered all our sins, we wrote them down on a piece of paper to tell the priest. When my turn came, I found I had forgotten and left my list of sins at home. So I spoke to the little girl before me, who was coming out of the confession booth.

"Give me your list," I whispered.

So I borrowed hers and read them off to the priest.

But I'm sure I always had enough sins of my own for confession. On one occasion I punished my own little sister Tonka for doing no more than losing a little black bug of mine. She was five and I was seven. I had the bug and I told her, "Now you watch that little black bug."

I went away and came back and said, "Where's my little black bug?"

"I lost it," Tonka said.

"Now give me that bug," I said.

"I lost it." Tonka started to whimper, "But I'll get you another little black bug just like it."

She started to look around frantically for another one. "Here it is!" she said.

"No," I said, "that isn't the same bug—I want *my* little black bug. Now give me my bug or I'll go and drown myself."

Tonka started to bawl at the top of her voice, and our Mamicka came running out. I quickly changed my tune.

## *The Soil and the Saints*

"I don't want the bug," I told Tonka, "and I'm not going to drown myself, either."

Tonka immediately stopped bawling.

I don't know where I could have drowned myself anyway. The creek was the only water around our place, and it was only two feet deep, hardly enough for even a little girl to drown herself. Anyhow, I didn't care to go into that creek because I didn't want to be a mermaid. The "bugle man" in our village had promised us that being turned into a mermaid was what happened to little girls who got caught in the creek. The way he told it to us one day, it was much nicer to be a little girl than to be a mermaid.

The bugle man was the man who walked the streets of the village at night, keeping watch over the village and announcing the time with his bugle. On the hour he would blow his bugle the same number of times as the hour, and his deep voice would sing out through the village. "Blow the ninth hour . . ." he would call out at 9 p.m. after sounding nine blasts on his bugle, ". . . everybody give praise to God and His Son Jesus." Sometimes, lying in bed, you would hear him as late as 3 a.m., which was the last hour he blew. Three long blasts of the bugle, then his voice in the distance, eerie and rolling. "Blow the third hour . . . get up, good soul, and kneel down and pray to God and to Saint Florian that he will save our village from fire . . . blow the third hour. . . . Glory be the name of Jesus and the Holy name of Mary . . ."

In the daytime this same bugle man had another job as "pasture man," the one who looks after people's livestock in the fields. Sometimes, while we were watching our geese,

### *An Unusual Preparation for the Underground*

we would call out to him in the next\* pasture, and he would come over.

"Uncle," we would say, "tell us what you saw last night at three in the morning."

Then he would tell us ghost stories. He said he saw a dog running and fire was coming out of his mouth. He said he saw a lady walking in the air, not even touching the ground—and when he saw this lady he knew that someone in the village had died and that that lady was coming to take the dead one away.

By this time our mouths would be wide open and our backs happily frosted with goose-pimples. This would encourage the bugle man, and he would go on.

"You know that creek which runs through here?" he said.

We knew the creek well. We had to cross it, over a little bridge, to bring our geese to the pasture and to take them back to our houses in the village at night.

"Well, in that creek," the bugle man said, "lives a *vodny muz*—a 'water man'. And he has long, long green hair. When the moon is shining, the water man climbs up out of the water, up on to the bridge, and sits there combing his long green hair. If anyone goes over the bridge when he's combing his green hair, the water man pulls them down into the creek. Little girls especially," he said, looking around at all us little girls. "If it's a girl he gets, he makes a mermaid out of her. Then the mermaid swims in the water and cries all the time, wanting to get out."

We found this very delightful to listen to in the daytime, with all the goose-pimples. But at night when we had to go home over that bridge, it was a different thing. As we came near it, we would get scared, and our hearts would

## *The Soil and the Saints*

pound. We would chase the geese as fast as possible over the bridge. Nobody wanted to be a mermaid. Even in the daytime when we would sometimes go swimming in the creek, we would always splash the water a little bit first.

"Water man! Water man! Out of the water!" we'd say as we splashed it. "Watching angel! Watching angel! Into the water!"

Then we would cross ourselves so the water man wouldn't have a chance to get us and make mermaids out of us. Then we would go swimming.

I didn't seem to get any better as I grew up. When I was eight, my cousin Ignac, who was only five and lived with my grandmother, used to come with me sometimes to watch the geese. We gave water to the geese in a big crockery dish which we brought along from Grandma. One day Ignac had gone off playing and I was trying to give the geese some water. But the geese were mean that day, the big old one especially. Every time I put water in the dish from the creek, he kept knocking it over with his big bill. Finally I dug a hole. I was going to put the crockery dish in the hole, then fill it with water so the big goose wouldn't upset it. So I dug the hole and put the dish in it. But while I was pushing the dish down in the hole, it split in two.

I was scared. I didn't want to tell Grandma I had broken her crockery dish. So I thought of a way out.

I fitted the two pieces of the dish together very neatly and put it in the hole. Then I sprinkled some dirt over the crack. No one could have told the dish was split. When Ignac came back, I busied myself with the dish in the hole.

"What you doing?" he asked.

"I'm putting the dish in this hole so the geese won't

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knock it over," I said, as if that were a very clever thing. "You want to help?"

"Yes."

So he came over, and I told him to push the dish down farther. "Push it a little harder," I said.

He did, and it "broke".

I started scolding him. "Look what you've done! You broke the dish! You're going to have to tell Grandma you broke the dish."

He started to cry and I put my arm around him. "Don't cry, Ignac," I said. "Grandma likes you better than she likes me. Anyhow, you're small. Just tell the truth," I said piously. "That's always best. Just tell her you broke the dish, and she'll forgive you."

So we went back, carrying the two pieces of the dish.

"Grandma," Ignac said, "I just pushed the dish a little tiny bit"—which was certainly true—"and it fell apart."

And he burst out bawling.

"There, there," Grandma said. "Don't cry. You can't help it if you broke the dish. Anyhow, it was an old dish."

"It's nice of you, Grandma," I said, "not to be hard on little Ignac. He couldn't help it," which was also the truth.

I used to run to Grandma when things happened. Once I fell out of a cherry tree where I had climbed to get something to eat. I didn't fall very far. But I got so scared I ran to my grandmother's house yelling, "I'm killed, killed, killed!"

My grandfather came out. "How can you be killed when you're yelling like that?" he said disgustedly.

Then I stopped and thought to myself. "Grandpa's right. I couldn't be killed if I'm alive."

As we got a little older, our job was to take lunches to

## *The Soil and the Saints*

our father in the fields. We would take some potatoes and some sauerkraut, and when it was cold, some hot bean soup in a tall can with a handle on it. The can was heavy, and once on my way to the fields I set it down a moment. But I didn't set it on a very level place, and the can turned over and the soup came spilling out. I picked the can up and looked inside. It still had beans in the bottom. So I went to the creek where the geese swam and filled the can up with water and shook it all up well. Then I went on to the field where my father was and handed him his lunch.

Usually it was a big thing to eat with our father in the fields when we took the lunch out to him. We always liked to sit and eat with him in the fields.

"Will you have some soup, Cilka?" he said, which was his pet name for me.

"No, thank you, 'Tato," I said, "I'm not very hungry today."

He looked at me and shrugged. He started eating himself. He took a spoonful of the soup. He stopped, and his face looked funny.

"What kind of soup is this?" he said.

"The kind Mamicka makes," I said.

He took another spoonful, though much more slowly, tasting it.

"Well," he said, "it tastes a little different from what Mamicka usually makes."

But he was so hungry from working in the fields that he ate it anyhow.

My brother Edo and I were big favourites with each other. He was the one who came just before me, just a little over a year before. Later he was to be responsible for me

### *An Unusual Preparation for the Underground*

being able to go to school to the nuns in the town nearby. He was always having fun. We used to fight about who was stronger and smarter, and sometimes he would trick me. One of his jobs was to cut straw on the machine which had two blades and a wheel you turned by hand. Then you mixed the straw with clover and gave it to the cows. Edo would fill the box on the machine with straw and say to me, "You say you're stronger than I am? I'll bet I can turn the wheel more times than you can." So I'd keep turning and he'd keep saying, "I bet you can't do any more," until my tongue was hanging out. Then he'd take it and turn it more times than me. I couldn't allow this, so I'd go at it again. That way he got me to do half his work, which I didn't realize until it was over.

Or in the winter, when we had to carry pails of water to the cows in the barn, he'd say, "I bet you can't carry two pails at the same time. I tell you. I've got a pocketful of walnuts," and he'd clank them together. "I'll give you a walnut for every pail you carry." I would almost break my arms carrying more than him. I could have gone to the attic and got all the walnuts I wanted, but the ones Edo gave me tasted better.

Despite the tricks, Edo and I liked each other very much and used to get into a lot of things together. One thing we got into was our father's beehives. We'd push a stick into the beehive hole, then run away fast before the bees could get us. Then we'd stop and lick the stick. We liked sweets a lot, but my father, if he'd known, would not have approved of this way of getting them. He wouldn't have approved of another way, either ~~which was~~ to go up in the attic where our father kept ~~the sugar~~, which was one of the few things



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he had to buy. It was a beautiful thing, this sugar. It was shaped like a pyramid and weighed about ten kilos—or did, before Edo and I started reducing it. Tato kept it locked up in a box. But the box had only slats over it, which weren't a great problem for someone like Edo to loosen. The sugar was very hard, but this wasn't a great problem for Edo either. Edo had good teeth. He'd bite off one piece—for himself. Then bite off another piece—for me. Then we'd nail the slats back.

Another thing we liked, Edo and I, was gooseberries. We liked them either way—ripe or green. My father had a lovely gooseberry field, which we weren't supposed to explore and especially when the gooseberries were green. One day as we were sampling the green gooseberries, we saw someone coming from far away and recognized the shape of our Tato. When he was still quite far away, he started yelling, and we started running. When we'd got away, we congratulated ourselves on being so clever.

"He didn't even know who it was," Edo said.

"No, he didn't," I said. "I guess we were pretty smart."

That night at supper Tato started eating and talking.

"You know," he said in a very easy manner, "today I saw two doggone kids picking my gooseberries. You know, Mamicka," he said to Mamicka, "I don't like kids picking my gooseberries, and they're still green, too. If I could only have caught those two kids, I would have fixed them up . . ."

Edo and I found all of a sudden we were very hungry and started eating pretty fast.

"If I could only catch them . . ." Tato went on, and twisted

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the points of his moustache, looking at us. It was his nice way of telling us not to let it happen again.

He preferred this way. My love for children I got mainly from my father. Tato. "Daddy." He loved his own children especially, but he loved all children, too. He was the Saint Nicholas for the village. In summer evenings or on Sunday afternoons, he would go out into the back-yard and start playing his trumpet. Tato was a medium-sized man, but with great lungs inside him. The trumpet would sound through the village like the voice of Gabriel. That was the signal for the children to come running to join his own children in gathering around him and listening to him play and singing the songs he played. I thought it a magic thing how he could look at those strange symbols on the music paper and from them make such sweet music come as must charm the angels. He played songs like "Jano Pastured Three Oxen" and "The Fine Clover" and "In a Broad Field Stand the Pear Trees". The songs were mostly about the things that grew and flew and walked in the fields. He would play his trumpet and we would sing:

Under our window flows the water,  
Little girl, please water my horse.  
No, I won't water him,  
Because I'm scared of him,  
I'm scared of him  
Because I'm too small.

Then he'd play the goose song, which was a song about the geese around Pressburg, which was the German name for Bratislava when Slovakia was a part of Austro-Hungary, as it was up to the end of the First World War. He

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would play his trumpet, and we would sing the goose song:

Near Pressburg on the Danube River  
The geese are swimming.  
Take a big gun, boy,  
And shoot me one.

I won't shoot those geese,  
Because I know them.  
They are geese of my Zuzka  
To whom I go.

But our favourite of all the songs Tato played was a very old song of Slovakia which we liked because we could act it out as he played it.

A wild duck was flying high  
And a young man, a good hunter,  
Shot her in the side.  
He shot off her wing and right leg  
And she cried bitterly  
And sat down on the water.

And she cried: "O my mighty God,  
I have finished my flying,  
And I have finished forever  
Feeding my small children."

As Tato played we would sing and flap our arms like duck wings, and then when the duck was hit in the song all stand on one leg. At the end we would sit down, as if on the water, and cry bitterly, like mother duck.

Sometimes Tato would dance the polka with me in the

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yard—oh, the fun of it! And sometimes he would put aside his trumpet and play something else.

"God gives you things, too, to get music from," he would say.

He would reach over and pluck a thorn leaf. And while we looked at him wide-eyed and unbelieving, he would bring music, a kind of whistling, from the thorn leaf.

When it got late the other children would go home and we would go inside and get ready for bed. Then Tato would take four or five of us into his bed and tell us stories—fairy stories and religious stories. He told us how the earth was created. He told us how Jesus was born and had to run away into Egypt, how the soldiers were sent after Him and, trying to find Him, came upon a farmer cutting wheat.

"Have you seen a child and his mother?" the soldiers asked the farmer.

"Yes," the farmer said. "When I was seeding this wheat."

"No, this was just yesterday," the soldiers said impatiently. "Not months ago."

But actually it had been Jesus the farmer saw, for He had passed that way only yesterday, and His passing by had made the wheat grow from seed to harvest in one day.

Then Tato would tell us another story of how the sad farmer was made happy.

"There was a farmer very downcast and sad," Tato told us. "He had no shade and he had to work hard in the fields and he was sweating very badly. Finally he got so sad and tired he just sat down in the fields. There were no trees, no birds, no nothing, just the empty fields. He was very sad. Then suddenly Jesus appeared in the fields. Jesus took

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a piece of soil on which was the farmer's sweat and rolled it in His hands. Then Jesus threw this piece of soil up in the air and clapped His hands."

And Tato would clap his hands and our eyes would watch intently.

"Suddenly out of the piece of soil that Jesus had thrown in the air and that had the farmer's sweat on it flew a bird. And the bird started to sing very beautifully. That is the way our Slovak field bird the *skovranok* (skylark) was created. And after that the bird stayed always where the farmer was so that the farmer had someone to sing sweetly to him and encourage him, and was happy."

Some of the stories had something to say to us in addition to just the story. One told about Jesus and Saint Peter going along together. Peter was always very lazy. One day Jesus and Peter saw a halier, which is the Slovak penny, lying on the ground.

"Peter," Jesus said, "pick up that halier."

"One halier?" Peter said. "What can you buy with one halier? Why should I bend right down for one measly halier?"

So Jesus bent down Himself and picked up the halier. When they came to a town, Jesus bought cherries with the halier—eighteen cherries He got for one halier. It was a very hot day, and they continued walking. After a while Peter got very thirsty. Jesus was walking a little ahead of him and He dropped a cherry. Peter bent down and picked it up and ate it to quench his thirst. Then Jesus dropped another cherry. Peter bent down and picked up that one. Finally Jesus had dropped eighteen cherries. Then Jesus waited, and Peter caught up with Him.

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"It is an interesting thing," said Jesus, "when a person is lazy."

"How is that, Master?" Peter asked.

"You didn't want to bend once for a halier," Jesus said, "and yet you bent eighteen times for the cherries that the halier bought."

"Master," Peter said, "from now on I obey."

Tato was a very religious man and used to lead the prayers in church before the priest arrived, saying them very loud, and all the people repeating after him. Also he made his own wine. These two facts were not entirely unrelated. Tato was very proud of his wine and would pray his best when he had had a glass of it. He had a special prayer he always said before he raised a glass of his wine to drink:

I thank you, Almighty Everlasting God  
For your great kindness  
In blessing this good wine for me.  
Let your Name be blessed for ever and ever  
Through this heavenly gift.

And he would swallow his glass of wine, pretty often a whole pint of it in one go.

Tato, as I say, was very proud of his wine. When anyone came in the house, the first thing he did was to make them taste it. He thought everyone liked it as much as he did. He had dozens of different kinds of wine, as many as 500 or 600 gallons of wine in the cellar at one time. But he never sold a drop of it in his life. He always said God gave him the wine for nothing, and so he would give it away.

When my sisters were growing up and had boys calling on

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them, Tato liked to try to make the boys drunk. He was very happy if he could make a boy calling on one of my sisters drunk. One way he did this was to go to the cellar and cut a hole in the side of an empty pumpkin. Then he would fill the pumpkin with wine, keeping his finger in the hole. He would bring the pumpkin upstairs, where the boy was waiting for my sister. "Here you are, boy!" Tato would say, walking over to him. Then, when he got almost on top of him, he would suddenly pull his finger out, saying, "Don't let this excellent wine go to waste on the floor!" The startled lad would thrust his mouth to the pumpkin and keep gurgling until the level of the wine got below the hole.

Another of Tato's methods was to take the young man who was calling on one of my sisters down into the cellar and invite him to taste with him some of each of the dozen different kinds of wine he kept there, and taking taste for taste with him.

"Ah-h-h, what a beautiful wine," Tato would say as he tasted another. "Isn't this a beautiful wine?"

"A be-yeautiful wine," the young man, who by this time would be starting to weave, would say.

"But you haven't tasted anything," Tato would say, stepping over to another jug, "until you taste *this* wine."

And the poor boy would have to taste that one. He couldn't very well show that he was a sissy in front of the man whose daughter he was calling on. It was an unusual young man who could get out of that cellar without some help from Tato. He was a very kind man. But my sisters did not always appreciate his kindness to their boy friends.

Then one day in 1917 Tato went away to war. Slovakia was part of Hungary, which we didn't like, and though the

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Slovaks weren't happy about fighting for 'Hungary, he had to go. The war had been going on for three years, but Tato had not been taken because of his family. Now they had to have everybody. It was the saddest day of my life when he went away. I couldn't understand it. All I knew was that many men had gone from the village and never come back. I was six when they took Tato, and I thought I would die with my tears.

He made a wooden chest to keep his soldier's things in. Then that last day he took us all, all of his children and Mamicka, into the nearby town of X. It was the first time I had ever seen this town which later was to become so much a part of my life. Tato wanted to have our picture taken to carry with him. We went to the photographer's and then to the train station, where one by one he blessed and kissed us.

"Tato"—I remember looking up at him there on the very platform from which many years later, and after yet another war had gone by, I was to flee from the Communists—"Tato, I will pray for you every night to come back soon."

Sometimes, when he was gone, I would wake up at midnight remembering I hadn't prayed for my Tato. I was sleeping with Mamicka now that Tato was gone and the bed was hollow beside her, and I would make her get out of bed and pray with me. She was a tiny little woman, and during that war when she had to take care of the farm, she began to grow old too soon.

Tato went to the Russian front, then to Italy. He wrote us letters and Mamicka read them aloud to all of us.

Then the war was almost over, and everyone was rob-



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bing the stores, and there was something I later learned they called "anarchy". Whatever it was, it was bad. I decided to go robbing myself. But all I got was an old person's stick, which I brought proudly home and my mother immediately made me burn.

"It makes no difference if other people are doing it," she said when I objected. "*We* are not doing it."

She must have understood, though, that I was only trying to help, for she held me and stroked my hair.

"Your little robbing journey," she said, and smiled softly, "—an old person's cane."

One day soon after that, it was in October 1918, I was bringing the geese back from the fields. While I was still a distance away from the house, I saw a man wearing a uniform and a long beard come walking into the yard. I saw everyone running towards him, and as I came up, I could see that my mother was sobbing and my sisters were crying. "Tato, Tato . .

"Tato?" I said to them. "Where is Tato?"

"There!" they all said, pointing to the man with the long beard.

"We never had a Tato like that," I said doubtfully. "Our Tato never looked like that."

Then the bearded man was swooping me up into his arms and through that long beard, all fuzzy, was kissing me and murmuring "Cilka". Then I knew, even through the beard, that it was my Tato.

He brought me from Italy a little doll which opened and closed her eyes. He also made us, from Italy, a dish we had never had—polenta. He had truly been far away.

He brought us stories, too, of faraway places and many

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new songs, soldier's songs, playing them on his trumpet,  
then teaching us the words.

Pressburg's Armory is painted,  
The boys are painting it with songs,  
Boys with songs,  
Girls with tears,  
Pressburg's Armory is painted . . .

Far away in the foreign country,  
Far from mother, town and little home,  
I am praying, and thinking of the time  
When to my beloved ones I return,  
Return from war to home again.

It seemed a very sad song, and I would cry and be glad  
this Tato had returned home.

A week after Tato got back from the war came a great  
day, 28 October 1918. On that day was declared Czecho-  
slovakia's independence from Austro-Hungary. In the village  
was a celebration such as I had never seen. For a thousand  
years Slovakia had been ruled by others, and none of the  
Slovaks liked it, especially Tato, who was one of the main  
ones in the village who talked all the time for Slovak  
independence. He would get very angry that even in the  
schools they would not teach the Slovak language, but made  
all the children learn Hungarian. When I started in the first  
form, while Tato was away at the war, it got me very mixed  
up to be taught a language that I had never heard at home, so  
personally I was very happy about the independence, too.  
And what a celebration there was!

We went through the streets, the whole village, with

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Tato right there in the lead, carrying big paper lanterns on sticks with candles in them and everybody shouting at the top of his lungs.

*"Nech žive Slovensko! (Long live Slovakia!)"* everyone shouted, Tato the loudest. "Long live the freedom for Slovaks who have been punished for a thousand years!"

Being a very religious man, Tato used to lead pilgrimages through the woods to shrines. The biggest pilgrimage each year was the one in late May to the Shrine of Mary's Portion. From all over Slovakia people would come on this day, including half our village, which would make the pilgrimage to this shrine. All the children of the village looked forward to the time when they would go on the Mary's Portion pilgrimage. My turn came when I was nine.

Mary's Portion used to be a shrine out in the middle of the forest, but so many people started going to it that a little town grew up around it, though there was still no road then. It came from the time there were bandits who robbed people. There was one band of three bandits who used to split up what they got three ways among themselves. One of these bandits was married and had a little girl. On one occasion the little girl got very sick and was ready to die. Then her father the bandit heard that someone had seen the Blessed Virgin at a spring in the forest where he and the other gangsters used to hide out after robbing people. So the bandit had his wife take their sick child to the spring. The mother washed the child in the spring, and the child was healed and did not die. Then the bandit told the other two bandits that he didn't want to be a bandit and rob any more. So they split what they had in their treasury four ways—one portion each for themselves, and one portion

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for Mary for healing the child. And so the name, Mary's Portion. And a statue of Mary and a church were built on the site of the spring, and pilgrims went there.

I looked forward to going to Mary's Portion more than anything in my whole life up to then. Then as the day got near, I got a sore toe.

The sore toe was from my first pair of shop shoes, which Tato had bought me a few days before. Until we were about nine we wore shoes with wooden nails made by the village shoemaker, though as soon as March came we went barefooted. I had been so excited to have the shop shoes that the first night I had slept with them under my pillow, smelling the new leather, it smelled so good, I thought I was in heaven. But now I was annoyed with my new shoes for giving me a sore toe and threatening my trip to Mary's Portion. Most of the way you went on the train, but fifteen miles of it you walked through the fields. Tato said he didn't think I could or should walk fifteen miles with a sore toe. I told him I would go barefooted. That way my sore toe wouldn't bother. He said it was too long a trip for bare feet, but I begged him, and finally he said Yes. I would have crawled there on my hands and knees rather than miss the pilgrimage to Mary's Portion.

So one morning, barefooted, I was in the procession which started out very early from the village. A mighty 200 of us, and my Tato leading them, and me right beside him. It gave me a shudder to think I might have missed it. Going through the fields, Tato would read aloud from the Holy Bible, loud enough to carry back over all the people following him. As the pilgrims go towards Mary's Portion from all over Slovakia, each group sings its own song to the

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Virgin Mary. Tato led our procession in singing our song, singing out a line in his big, big voice which boomed across the fields, and all the 200 walking behind singing the line after him.

Mary be hailed, the Virgin Mary,  
When you see Her picture  
Call Hail, and Hail Mary,  
Hail be Thee, Mary full of grace,  
From us Hail Mary! Hail Mary!

As they walked along singing, all the pilgrims would take off their hats. I carried my Tato's hat.

The first night out we slept in a barn along the way, for all the people open up their barns for the pilgrims to Mary's Portion. Next morning we started out early again. By noon we were at the shrine in the forest.

What a crowd of people! More than I had ever seen together in my whole life. Later Tato told me there were at least 10,000 of them, all come to honour the Virgin and the healing of the bandit's little girl. It was the most excited I had ever been.

Then, suddenly, I found myself lost. I looked around and couldn't see any of my own people. Many, many people—but none of them mine.

I started crying. I think it is worse to be all alone and lost with a lot of strange people than to be all alone and lost just in the forest. Then, above my crying, I heard a big lusty voice singing from inside the church. I ran up the steps to the church. It was very crowded. I stood in the entrance and I heard a voice I knew singing out above all the other voices in the church:

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Mary be hailed, the Virgin • Mary,  
When you see Her picture  
Call Hail, and Hail Mary . . .

“That’s my Tato!” I yelled, so that everyone looked around. No one could sing quite as loud as my Tato. I pushed my way through all the people right up to the front of the church and held on to him. Without losing a note, he took me in his arms and held me and kept on singing, louder than ever:

. . . Hail be Thee, Mary full of grace,  
From us Hail Mary! Hail Mary!

For a child, and especially a child of the farm in Slovakia, religion was a part of nearly everything in your life. The priest was not just a man you listened to on Sunday and went to confession to. He was the one who came into the state school, where you went in the village the first six forms, and taught you religion. He was the one who pulled your ear when you met him in the village.

Our village priest was Father • Stefan, who was there thirty years and was full of fun and jokes.

Father Stefan’s favourite joke with children when you ran into him in the street was to stop you and say, “What is your name? Tell me without opening your mouth.”

I’d try and try and my cheeks would puff out and as soon as I blew a little he’d catch it.

“You’re opening your mouth!”

Then I’d try to pronounce my name out of that corner of my mouth which was away from him. He’d look around.

“You’re opening your mouth!”

So when you couldn’t do it, he’d pull your ear or give

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you a little push: Then, even though you couldn't do it, he'd get a very solemn face and reach into his pocket, while you stood there knowing what was coming.

"You tried pretty hard anyhow," he'd say, and give you a piece of candy.

Father Stefan always had a pocketful of candy, and the children knew it.

It was the bells of Father Stefan's old stone church, one hundred and fifty years old, that, wherever you might be in the village, told you the time. High in the tower of the church were three bells. A little bell, a medium-sized bell, and a big bell. The medium-sized bell told you the time three times a day—at six in the morning it told you to get up, at noon it told you to eat, then in the evening, at six in the winter and eight in the summer, it told you to come in from the fields. The little bell rang at seven-thirty to tell you to get ready for eight o'clock Mass. At seven forty-five both the little and the medium-sized bell rang to tell you you didn't have much more time. Then there was the big important bell. It rang only on Sunday, or when someone died. On Sunday it announced the Masses. When someone died, that was the only time all three bells rang at once. Then in a great ringing, they tolled every hour for three days.

We never thought of religion as something apart from our lives, as something for Sundays only. It was woven right into them, as flaxen threads are woven into cloth. Starting with the soil, which very early became an everyday part of the life, there was religion. The priest was the leader in our village in everything. There was the day of Saint Mark's, with a big procession to the fields led by Father Stefan,

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who blessed the soil and sprinkled holy water on it to maké it give forth good crops. Saint Mark's Day comes when the plants have broken through the ground, and the fields are beginning to be green and the priest prayed that there would be neither frost nor drought nor hail, but a good harvest of all the crops.

Saint Mark's was for all the crops of the field. But in addition each crop had a special saint to watch over it. Saint Urban was for the grapes and watched over them—Saint Urban was once himself a grower of grapes. Saint Vendel was supposed to save the cattle, and he watched over all the livestock. Saint Elias brought the rain and kept the drought away, and when it was very dry, you went to the fields and prayed to Elias for rain because when Elias prayed one time, he got rain. Saint Florian was the saint for fire, and he saved everything and everyone from fire. Every saint had a different thing he watched, and on each of the saints' days there were prayers to that saint asking him to be good to that crop. But the biggest day was for Saint Mark's, who was no specialist for any one crop but watched after all the growing things.

Thus the child knew religion as he knew the soil—they were a part of each other. Religion meant the happy things, like festivals. 29 June was Saints Peter and Paul Day, the day before the start of the harvest, and there was a big festival. Pictures of Saint Peter carrying the key to heaven in his hand were put up everywhere, and the children were all happy because they said Peter, with that key he was holding, locked the doors of the schools so nobody had to go in there any more. On the day after Saints Peter and Paul Day, started the grain harvest, and then came the



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threshing of the wheat, the rye, the barley, and the oats. Then came the other harvests. In September, the beans and the poppy seeds. In October started the harvest of the potatoes and the corn, of the sugar beets and the grapes in the vineyard.

Then all the harvests were done, and on 1 November came a mighty day. The Day of All Saints, to thank them all for the harvests. Many fat geese were roasted, and there was lots of *kolache*. The gypsies played, and the people danced on the dusty road; and out there, too, always was Tato, playing his trumpet with twenty-five or thirty other musicians—the others drinking beer, but Tato drinking his own wine. For the children there was a merry-go-round and “canvas stores” which came to the village with toys and balloons and monkeys-on-a-stick and games like cat-in-the-bag, when you didn’t know what you had bought until you opened it, though almost always it was a ring. I started liking rings from this time and used to collect and save those I got from cat-in-the-bag, for I had noticed that a nun wore a ring. I didn’t know until years later that my cat-in-the-bag rings were not the same real gold as the ring the nun wore.

Religion for me, and for all the children, meant all these happy festivals.

All through the year there were big celebrations on the holy days and happy things for the children to do. On Palm Sunday there were branches to cut from the trees and to dress up with decorated egg shells and carry from house to house singing, and rewards of candy and pastry to collect at each house. And every Sunday, when you got a little bigger, and provided you were a girl, there were starched underskirts to wear. The starched underskirts, of linen,

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were a very big thing in a girl's life. You got your first one when you were about nine years old, and each year you added another underskirt, until finally you were wearing four of them to church on Sunday, all of them starched with very heavy starch and richly embroidered. It was a big thing in the year when you were able to add another one. If a girl was very rich, she might get to be four feet wide at the bottom, wearing maybe six starched underskirts, and could barely get in the door of the church. A family's wealth was measured by the number of skirts the daughters wore. "She looks just like a poppy seed flower," was an expression for a girl wearing many starched underskirts in church, for then the girls would indeed look like the poppy seed when it is in bloom, with all its petals.

It was about the starched underskirts that Tato gave me my one and only spanking.

One Saturday my older sister Irena was starching underskirts in the back yard, then ironing them with the charcoal iron, which had hot charcoal inside it.

"Will you iron some for me?" I asked.

"No," said Irena, and went on ironing her own.

So I decided to cure this attitude by picking up some stones and throwing them at her. Promptly she slammed down her iron and started after me. The first thing you knew, there was a great jumble of hitting and yelling and screaming, bringing Tato forth from the house.

"What in God's great world is going on here?" he asked.

"Nothing much," Irena said very casually. "Cecilia's throwing stones at me."

"Throwing stones!" Tato exclaimed. "Little girls throwing stones!"

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It was the first and last time he ever spanked me. Also the first and last time I threw stones at anybody.

During Advent, when the people for four weeks prepared themselves for Christmas, all of us went to church in the dark, at 5 a.m., carrying lanterns with candles in them, and it was a very happy time. Then on Saint Nicholas Eve, 5 December, we shined our shoes and put them in the window for Saint Nicholas to fill. Whoever shined his shoes best got more, so we used black wicks and spat on our shoes to make them very shiny. I put my shoes in the window and left the window open. One Saint Nicholas night when Mamicka went to close it because it was cold, I wondered, "How is Saint Nicholas going to get in if the window is closed?" So after Mamicka was in bed asleep I got up and opened it again.

In the morning the shoes were full of apples and dried prunes and walnuts and many good things, including beautiful and strange striped candy made in the shapes of tulips and stars. My older sisters tried to tell me, "There isn't any Saint Nicholas. Mamicka put all that in." One by one I took out the good things.

"The walnuts," I held them and told myself, "we grow them on the farm—Mamicka could have put them in."

"The dried prunes," I held these, "we grow them—Mamicka could have put them in."

"The apples," I held these, "we grow them on the farm—Mamicka could have put them in."

I was getting worried until I took out the striped candy.

"The striped candy!" I held it triumphantly. "Mamicka 'couldn't have put that in—we don't grow that on the farm. There is a Saint Nicholas."

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Two days before Christmas there was Jesus to see coming down a golden ladder, provided you had been good that day by eating no breakfast and only a glass of milk and a piece of bun for lunch and supper. For Tato told us, "Whoever does that will be able to see Jesus coming down on a golden ladder in the woods."

One year that night Edo and I sat very late looking out the window, watching for Jesus. I didn't see a thing. Suddenly Edo popped out very excitedly: "Over there! Jesus is coming there!"

"Where?" I said.

"You dumbbell," he said, pointing. "Over there! He's coming down a golden ladder right over there!"

I was almost climbing up Edo's back trying to see Him.

"You blind dumbbell," Edo said. "Can't you see? Over there!"

"I don't see Him," I finally said.

"He's gone now," Edo said disgustedly.

I felt very sad. "That proves it," Edo said triumphantly. "I didn't eat much—that's why I saw Him. You ate too much so that's why you didn't see Jesus."

And I thought, "But I drank only a little bit of milk." Then I thought, "Maybe I took a little bigger bun than anybody else and that's why I couldn't see Jesus coming down on the golden ladder."

Then Christmas Eve came.

On Christmas Eve everybody had to eat half an apple with someone else. That way, if you got lost in the dark or the forest any time in the coming year, you would be able to find your path if you thought of the person you ate the

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apple with. Then the boys played cards. The girls went into the kitchen and played their Christmas Eve game.

This game was to melt lead on the stove, then to pour the hot lead into a pail of cold water. Whatever figures came out, that was the life you would have. If the piece of hot lead made the figure of a horse, you were going to marry a farmer. A figure of a gun, and you were going to marry a hunter. Most of the girls saw figures in the shape of something to marry. But I always saw other figures. On one occasion I dropped some hot lead into the water and saw a figure in the form of a cross, and the girls asked me what I saw, and I told them. The next time I saw the figure of the glass of wine in the Blessed Sacrament, and I told them.

"You're not going to marry a priest," my sisters said, for the girls thought always of the figures as being their future husbands. "You can't marry a priest. And you're not going to be a priest yourself—you're a girl."

"I might be something else." I said.

And we went to bed and lay awake thinking of the figures in the water. We had taken off the sheets and were sleeping directly on the straw that Christmas Eve, for Tato had told us how Jesus was born in the straw.

Even our games were of religion. Before Easter we made whips by weaving eight willow branches together and knotting them on the end. Then we tried to whip each other, like Jesus was whipped. This could be a pretty rough game, even though religious and even though you put cardboard inside your dress or shirt. Once I really cracked a boy with a whip over the head, where he had no cardboard, and then ran off while he yelled after me, "I won't forget that one!"

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Two weeks later when I was chasing cows to pasture, he ran over and started beating on me with a stick.

"Remember that whip?" he said.

"I was just playing Jesus being whipped," I said, trying to fend off the blows from the stick.

"Well, next time you play Jesus and I'll play the whip," he said.

But my favourite game as a child was "Nuns". Nuns was a game in which the children tied white kerchiefs on their heads and one of them was the mother superior and all the others had to listen and do what she said. We used to play this game while watching the geese. We would make a little altar in the field, out of sticks, and put over it a white hanky and kneel and "pray", keeping one eye on the geese. We made rosaries from pieces of straw with little wads of paper for the beads. Two girls would take the part of farm women and two of nuns, and the "nuns" would pretend that they were going from house to house asking for eggs, which in this case were little stones. I much preferred Nuns to another game we played, "Wedding".

There were no real nuns in our village. But sometimes I used to see real nuns come to the village collecting eggs and vegetables for the convent in the town of X nearby, going from house to house on their rounds. One day when a nun came collecting to our house, no one else was home, so I hurried out to the henhouse and got all the eggs from under all the hens and gave them to her, for which my father, though religious, later had a word or two to say to me. Another time I saw a nun going through the village carrying a basket of eggs. I started following her. I wanted to ask her to let me help her carry the basket. I followed

## *The Soil and the Saints*

her for over a mile, but I never got up courage enough to ask her. And anyhow, I didn't know what language to use in asking her. I thought you had to use some heavenly language in talking to nuns—I suppose I had heard them using some Latin expression—and that since I didn't know this heavenly language, I couldn't talk to them. But I longed to know it.

By the time I was eleven, I began going into a little storage room in the cellar where I would lock myself in and light holy candles and kneel in front of them and pray. Sometimes the other children would come peeping. So I started stopping up the keyhole with the holy-candle wax.

About that time, eleven years old, I began working in my father's fields after school and in summer vacations. I hoed the sugar beets and corn and in the vineyards tied the grapes to sticks. I was supposed to get two rows to hoe, but I would always get a backache, so they would give me only one. And I would get behind even in that one. I was either lazy or had my mind on other things, and I am not the one to judge which. My mind would have been on going to church, which I was doing at eight o'clock every morning by then, and since the others didn't go, I was late in my work by the time I got to the fields and would get behind. My sisters would scold me for being late and tell me, though not harshly, that I was just lazy and wanted to loaf and that was why I went to church.

"You can go, too, if you want to," I would snap.

Edo would tell them to mind their own business and would help me to catch up in my hoeing, for he and I were always close friends, and he always fought for me. He would get his rows done, then take part of mine to hoe. I would

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make it up to him by pressing his trousers' with the charcoal iron when there was a festival or smuggling food to him when he had to stay in at noon at school for doing something he wasn't supposed to, which was pretty often.

Soon I was twelve, and in my last year of school in the village. After this, which was the sixth form, most of the children were taken out of school and worked in the fields, the girls until they got husbands, though a few of the boys and very rarely one of the girls would go on to the town of X to finish high school there in the convent school. So the time drew near when I would be through with school in the village, and would go to work in the fields. Edo was in the same form with me—he was a year older, but he had taken it easy going through school—and Tato was getting ready to send him on to high school in the town.

One day Edo took me aside.

"Listen," he said. "I've got an idea. Why don't you go to school instead of me?"

I looked at him very surprised. The boy was the one who went to school, not the girl.

"But I'm a girl," I said.

"I know that," he said impatiently. "What I'm talking about is . . . well, I like the work in the fields. I really like it."

"Then you can go to school and then come back afterwards and work in the fields," I said. "I don't think it would hurt to go to school, even if you're going to work in the fields afterwards."

"Yes, but that's just putting off what I want to do. I don't like school much. Haven't you noticed that? What I like is the fields, I tell you. Why don't I stay here and you go?"



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' We argued for a while, and finally I said, "It's all right with me then. This is very nice of you, Edo," I said timidly.

"This'll get me out of school," he said. "Me going to school—that's what I call a real waste of time. But you—somebody like you *ought* to go to school.

"If Tato will agree," I said. "I don't think he will agree."

So we went to see Tato. We were shy and afraid, but we went. Children don't go around deciding this sort of thing in Slovakia, and we were very afraid. It turned out we had reason to be. Tato didn't like the idea at all.

"It's the son who goes to school, not the daughter," he said. "That's the way it's always been. Who do you two younglings think you are, anyhow, changing all that around?"

"Tato," Edo said, "school would be a big waste on me. I don't like it, so I wouldn't do anything there. But Cecilia here . . . she likes it. That's hard to believe, but she does. She will work very hard in school. Won't you, Cecilia?" he said, kicking me.

"Oh, very hard!" I spoke up. "I'll work hard and be one of the best students."

"I doubt that," Tato said. "You have never been very famous for work."

"And I want to be a farmer," Edo said. "I like the fields. I don't like the books."

"All right," Tato said finally. "This is pretty revolutionary, but I suppose there's nothing to be done. Cecilia isn't any good here anyway," he said gruffly. "If I'm letting you go it's only because you're lazy and you might as well go to school."

I jumped up and threw my arms around him and kissed him. Edo and I were both happy. Edo stayed in the fields—

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and to-day he is running the farm, though still a bachelor, probably because he had too many sisters when he was young. And I went away to X, to the nuns.

## 3

### TROUBLED ROAD TO THE CONVENT

**N**ow I was in the midst of nuns, instead of just following one at a distance and being afraid even to speak to her, and the heavenly language was all around me.

I would get up at four-thirty every morning and take the six o'clock train from the village. I was not, I am sorry to say, as good a student as I had bragged to my father I would be when he let me go instead of Edo. I was never the last in the class, but I was far from ever being the first. Sometimes, to be truthful about it, I took the seven o'clock train instead of the six in order to miss the first hour of class, which was the hardest, being mathematics and physics. Then there were Latin and French and German and Slovak and religion. I liked zoology, that being about nature, and after children I love birds and flowers best in this world. But most of all the subjects I liked two: geography, for I liked to learn the description of the whole world and to learn how big it is; and gymnastics, which I liked very much, for I have always liked to run and jump. Then there was the gymnastics teacher

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I liked the nuns very much, though they led a hard life, being Ursulines. For me they were beings close to angels, and that school like heaven itself. But it was not the nuns who were most responsible for my deciding to be a nun myself.

It was the gymnastics teacher, more than anyone else, who was responsible for me deciding to be a nun.

To me, the gymnastics teacher was more of an angel even than the nuns. She was about thirty-five, slim and pretty, with a sweet round face and very long black hair, which she wore braided on top. We called the nuns "Sister", but the gymnastics teacher we called "Miss Teacher". She never raised her voice to any of the children, never got nervous with them like some teachers I have known. She was always kind and happy with them, for she loved children. Later, when I became a teacher myself, she was the one I always tried to model myself on. She wore dark grey dresses, but in the gym she wore a short navy gym skirt, white blouse, and running shoes, all very neat. She was very good on the parallel bars and rings. She was extremely graceful and it was a beautiful thing to see, her swinging through the air on the gym rings.

She was always happy, and we tried to keep her happy—we always tried to keep her the way she was. When she took us from the classroom to the gym, she'd ask us to be quiet and think of Jesus, and we'd be quiet for her more than for any of the sisters even. On her name day, which we celebrated in Slovakia instead of the birthday, we gave her a surprise party in the gym. We hid the flowers and the cake which we had bought with our own money behind the gym things, and when she came in, one girl started playing

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a violin she had, and we all started singing. That day we didn't have any class, but sat on the floor while Miss Teacher told us stories.

In a direct way my gymnastics teacher gave me two things: a pretty good skill on the parallel bars and rings, which she taught me and which I came to like very much; and Saint Joseph. He was her favourite saint. Saint Joseph, the husband of Mary that is, is the main saint of my country, Slovakia, and to us like Saint Patrick to Ireland. This is because he is the family saint, being the foster father of Jesus, and the family is very important in Slovakia.

The month of March is the month of Saint Joseph. Ten minutes at the end of the gym class were supposed to be a rest period before the next class, but during March Miss Teacher would ask, "Who wants to go with me to the chapel and pray to Saint Joseph?" And several of us would go, including always me.

Miss Teacher used to tell me. "If you pray to Saint Joseph, he'll get you anything you want—that is, if it's good for you to have it." I figured that if Saint Joseph made her the way she was, then I would start going to Saint Joseph myself. And that was the way he became my favourite saint. About this time, too, I was learning the parallel bars well from her, and I used to swing on the parallel bars and think of Saint Joseph.

But most of all Miss Teacher gave me something that brought on the decision in me to be a nun. It was strange, how she was so important in that. Strange, because we never discussed it once. She helped me decide it by being very religious herself. I admired her because she was an outsider, not a sister, and yet had such a religious spirit in

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her. I thought, "If being religious is being like Miss Teacher, then I want to be religious." From deciding to be religious, it was only a few steps, in my case, to deciding to be a nun. That was the way my gymnastics teacher was the most important of any of my teachers, including the sisters, in making me decide to be a nun, even though we never talked about it. Sometimes the influence is more from the person who doesn't talk but just is.

At the time, I did not bring this decision out in the open, even with myself. It was to be quite a long time yet before that happened. But I know now that the decision was shaped within me during the time I knew Miss Teacher.

The three years at convent school, from the time I was thirteen to nearly sixteen, went away fast. It was a very happy time. During vacations and holidays I would go back and work on the farm. One of these holidays was the only time I ever drank any of Tato's wine. My two older sisters and I had gone to the fields to gather corn-cobs in sacks and put them in piles for Tato to pick up later. We took along some cheese and bread and one of us had the sudden and different idea to take along some of Tato's wine, too. "It's cool," was the idea. "The wine will keep us warm." At noon we ate the cheese and bread and drank the wine. Suddenly we started feeling very strange and sleepy, and we lay down under the sacks. When we woke it was five o'clock, and Tato was standing over us and the empty jug was lying in the fields by us.

"A bunch of drunkards!" Tato said, "God in heaven, my own daughters a bunch of drunkards!"

Tato was very pleased for people to drink his wine, but we learned in a hurry that this didn't include his daughters.

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It was the last time I ever drank any wine—Tato's or anybody else's.

In school I had just one really unhappy time, and this was very near the end of school when I was fifteen. I was invited into the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, which was considered one of the best honours. When you were taken in, it was at a special ceremony in church, and you were given a medal of the Blessed Virgin hanging by a blue ribbon, and after that you were called a Marian girl. So when I was asked if I would like to join, I said Yes. I was very happy. It was the biggest thing that had ever happened to me.

Then I found out you had to have a white dress for the ceremony. I knew this would cost too much for my father to buy, and there was no time to make one. So I went to see the mother of the school.

"Mother," I said, "I have decided I don't want to join the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin."

She was very surprised. "What's wrong?" she said. "Don't you like the Virgin Mary?"

"Oh, yes!" I said quickly. "But—well, I don't want to join."

And I hurried out of her office. I think she thought I didn't want to spend the time praying that was required of Marian girls.

I missed not having the medal and being a member of the Sodality. To this day I feel unhappy about not having been able to join. It was the first time in my life I had ever realized that there was something called "poor".

After convent school I thought I wanted to be a teacher, but this would have meant four more years of school! I *knew* my family didn't have the money for that, but then

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I 'never expected it. And then the times were very hard, with many of my people emigrating across the ocean. My last week in school I went into the chapel and prayed before a statue of Saint Jôseph.

"Saint Joseph," I said, "tell me what to do."

Next day my aunt from a nearby village came to visit me at school. She said a priest she knew in her village needed a maid. His mother, who lived with him, had broken her leg, and the priest needed a girl who would help the cook and would also be a sort of nurse and companion for his mother. I looked on this as the answer to my prayer, and I went off to the village. I was fifteen.

The priest's house was a pretty brick building with a garden and courtyard and, at the back, an orchard of cherry trees, walnuts, pears, and plums. It was one of the prettiest places I had ever seen; and the church was right across the street. Walking up to it the first time, I knew I would like it.

When I got inside, the cook looked at me suspiciously.

"You look kind of ybung," she said. "You don't look seventeen to me."

I didn't know I was supposed to be seventeen. "Oh, yes," I said quickly, "I'm seventeen. And I'm very strong."

The priest's mother was sitting there in a wheel chair. Impulsively I reached down and picked her up. She was very startled, but she was a very tiny little old woman, too, and not hard to lift.

"See how strong I am?" I said to the cook.

"You'll do, I'm sure," the cook said.

"If this employment examination is over," the priest's mother said dryly, "will you please put me back?"

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The priest's mother was eighty-four years old, and her leg had been broken by a great Dane belonging to her son. It wasn't that the priest's great Dane didn't love his master's mother. He loved her so much that he ran up joyfully to her one day and knocked her down, fracturing her leg. She was a very kindly woman whom I quickly liked. We used to sit in the library, which had more books than I had ever seen in all my life before that, and I would read to her. Or I would darn socks and we would talk. She had another son who was a priest, and sometimes she would talk about how her two sons came to 'bc priests, and how they weren't exactly little angels when they were boys. This encouraged me a great deal, for whenever the thought would come up in my mind that I wanted to be a nun, I would be bothered by having been such a bad girl when I was little. And even after I wasn't so very little, I would think, remembering the wine and certain other things.

From the library I also took a lot of books to read myself, mainly *Christian Perfection*, which deals with the development of the spiritual life. I began to read more than I had ever read in my whole life, all of it religious books. It was a very busy time. I had to look after the poultry and in winter tend the stoves and look after the priest's mother, and then there was the reading.

In the mornings I would wheel the priest's mother across the street to the church for Mass celebrated by her son. In the summer I would wheel her out into the garden and give her cherries straight from the tree or pick some flowers and put them in her lap.

I had been there a year, and the second summer was starting, but she was still in her wheelchair, for she never



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really recovered from what the great Dane did to her leg. One day when we were in the garden, she looked up at me.

"My dear," she said, "do you mind if I ask you something?"

I said "No."

"Cecilia," she said, "why is it that you don't go to dances?"

I had never gone. I never went out with boys at all. So the answer came out of me all at once, in a burst.

"I want to go to a convent," I said.

She reached up and held my face. "Well, don't cry about it. I am very happy, my dear. It's nothing to cry about."

"But I don't know where to go or which one to choose."

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "it is true that there are many to choose from."

I looked at her, and I could see that she was smiling.

"How about the Ursulines," she said, "where you went to school?"

"And have to stay in all the time, to where you can't even go home if your parents die?" I said. "That's how closed up the Ursulines are. I don't want to be *that* closed up."

"That *is* a handicap," she said. "How about Saint Vincent's?"

"And wear those great big starched tops like big butterfly wings on your head so that you have to carry an umbrella all the time in case it rains?" I said, appalled at the idea. "I don't want to always have to carry an umbrella."

"H-m-m," she said, "that is a handicap."

I think she was beginning to doubt a little whether I was proper material for a nun.

"But I'm going to look around," I said firmly.

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Suddenly, only a week after that, she died. She went quietly as a nap. She had had Holy Communion from her son that morning in the church across the street. Two hours later she was sitting in her chair in the living-room and she just went to sleep.

So I wasn't needed there any more, and I prepared to leave. I was thinking more and more about a convent, but I didn't know what I would do. I was hesitating over something that I couldn't or wouldn't face up to in me. Then I got a letter from a cousin of my father who said she had heard from a friend, a *maid* at Saint Vincent's orphanage in Bratislava, who had written her that the orphanage needed another maid for three months. I had no intention of staying at Saint Vincent's, but this would give me something to do while I came to a decision, then figured out a way to act on the decision. So I went off to Bratislava on the Danube and the capital of Slovakia. I was sixteen.

The other maid and I became good friends. I began to tell her a little about my thoughts of wanting to be a nun. Then after I had been there about a month, she asked me one day if I would like to go with her to visit her cousin in the children's clinic in Bratislava where the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour were the nurses. So we went over. It was the same hospital where many years later I was to race up on to the roof, trying to get away from the Communists.

When we came in the hospital, the mother superior herself came down and kissed my friend who was a maid. I thought, "They're certainly nice, these Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour—the mother superior herself coming downstairs and kissing a maid."

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"May I present my friend?" my friend the maid was saying then. "Cecilia," she said, "this is my cousin."

Mother Superior herself was the maid's cousin!

Then Mother Superior took us into the reception room and had coffee brought for us. Then some more of the sisters who knew my friend the maid came in. It was the first time I had ever seen any Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour. They were all talking and laughing and being joyful, and I thought, "They're so nice, the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour! They're not stiff at all." And I liked their uniforms, too. First I saw the ring and loved it. Then I saw the bonnet and the collar and the veil, and everything nice and neat, nothing out of place. They had the Cross around their necks. They had big rosaries and a nice belt. I thought it was a beautiful uniform. And they were very happy, not stiff and solemn at all. This appealed to me hugely, for I have never liked being stiff and solemn. I wanted to be a nun and I didn't want to be stiff and solemn, and the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour seemed to prove this combination was no problem at all.

And then I knew it. "This is what I want. This is where I want to be."

"Would you like to see the hospital?" Mother Superior was saying to me, for we had finished our coffee.

"Oh, very much!" I said, and very happy, though I didn't know just then why she was asking me.

She took me over a part of it and then into the chapel, where one of the sisters was playing a tiny organ. I will never forget the song:

Take, Mother, in your arms the children . . .

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And suddenly Mother Superior began to sing it, in a voice sweet as the skylark's.

Take, Mother, in your arms the children,  
The ones who are coming in front of your altar,  
To you they are coming,  
With you they want to stay,  
And to see your holy face  
Above the height of the stars,  
Pouring into their souls,  
And taking all clouds away.  
Take, Mother, in your arms the children,  
The ones who are coming in front of your altar.

I felt that the words were talking straight to me and telling me to come home—here.

Then we went through the rest of the hospital. I saw all the sisters taking care of the sick children, and I knew from their faces that the sisters and the children loved each other.

At some point, I think when the tour was about over, I suddenly had the sensation that this was not just an idle tour, but that Mother Superior was measuring me from bottom to top. My friend the maid must have spoken to her cousin the mother superior about me wanting to be a nun. We came back into her office and talked awhile. She told me about the work of the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour.

"We care for the sick. We care for the aged. And we teach the little children."

"I like children," I said shyly.

She smiled. "I thought so," she said. "I could tell when we were upstairs," meaning in the sick children's rooms.

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She waited, and I looked down at my lap, and then I heard her say it.

"Well, you can have children," she said.

I looked up, and my mouth must have been very wide, for she was smiling broadly.

"Would you like to come into our convent?" she said.

It sounded just like Saint Peter asking me would I like to come into heaven.

I was so excited I was trembling. "Yes," I said, "but I don't know what to do. I don't know . . ."

I stopped. I knew then, for the first time, that my real hesitation all along had been over my family—over what Tato would say.

"Why don't you pray," Mother Superior was saying, "and the Holy Ghost will tell you what you should do? You're only supposed to do God's will."

When I left that hospital I was walking in a dream. I didn't know what I was doing. I was hypnotized. After two days I went to the mother superior in charge of Saint Vincent's orphanage, where I was working, and asked if I could go home, and she let me.

All the way home on the train my state of being in a happy dream kept withering away into a state of dread at having to tell Tato, and of trying to persuade him. Then I made up my mind that I would do it, I would get into the convent whatever happened. But this was foolish thinking—I had to have my parents' permission. It could not be done without it.

It wasn't that Tato wasn't religious. He was very religious. But he wanted all his daughters around him, and I

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was a favourite of his. I knew it would be very difficult to persuade him to let me go.

In addition, there was the money. I had to have a "dowry" of 1,000 crowns to get into the convent, plus 500 more crowns for my convent clothes. I had 500 crowns saved up from working as a maid. I needed 1,000 more from Tato. I knew this was a great deal of money for him.

When I got home, I didn't dare tell Tato directly. I just let the word get out among my friends and the people of the village that I had decided I wanted to go into a convent. Then a very curious situation developed. Tato and I had never spoken to each other directly about it. But he learned it from my friends and others, for everyone soon knew it. And suddenly the friends and other people started coming to me and trying to talk me out of it.

"Why do you want to go into a convent?" they would say. "Why don't you find yourself a good boy—there are lots around—and get married?"

I knew all this was the work of my Tato, that he was putting them up to it. Even my oldest sister Maria's boy friend, whom she later married, came to me and tried to talk me out of it.

"I know a boy who is looking for a wife just like you," he said. "Why don't I speak to him?"

"Oh, the devil is within you!" I said and stomped away, for I was getting tired of this campaign of my Tato's, of sending everyone to me to try to talk me out of it.

This went on for two months. Tato never recognizing the fact that I wanted to go, since I had never spoken to him about it, and pretending that he didn't know a thing about it; and me wanting very much to go but being scared to ask

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him. I knew I would burst out crying if he said I couldn't go. These were the two unhappiest months I had ever known.

The two months were brightened only by a trip I made to the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour convent itself in Bratislava, the one I would go to if I went at all. I didn't tell Tato I was going to Bratislava, only that I was going to the town nearby. The main convent was a pretty stucco building with a courtyard all blooming with trees and flowers. I learned later that the Duchess of Szappary of Hungary had built it for the nuns, after they had cared for her through an illness. This time the general mother superior, who had been told about me by the mother superior at the hospital, showed me through. I liked all I saw and thought, "When I come in here, I will be home."

Before I left, the mother superior said to me, "The doors are open."

By the time I got back to the village, I had decided I couldn't go on this way any longer.

So the next day I waited until he got out in the vineyards, where he was cutting grapes that day. Then I sat down and wrote him a letter. He was only a thousand yards away, but I preferred to do it by letter.

"God gave you so many children, Tato," I wrote. "Can't you give him back one?" And I added, "I will pray for you all of my life. Wouldn't it be nice to have a nun praying for you all of your life?"

I sent my little sister Tonka as a messenger to carry the letter to my father in the vineyard.

No answer came back. All day long I stayed in the house in fear and trembling. That night Tato came home and saw me sitting there.

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"What are you looking so scared about?" he said. "You look like a scared goose."

I didn't say a word but sat huddled up.

"So you want to go to the convent?" he bellowed out, just as if he'd never heard of it before.

He stood looking down at me. "Why you're just a child," he said. "It's a child's idea. Young girls are always talking about wanting to be nuns."

I felt the tears starting in me, but held them back.

"You're not coming running back home again once you go?" he said suspiciously.

"Oh no, Tato!" I said. "I won't do that."

"I don't want a daughter of mine starting out in a convent, and then having to run home because it was too tough for her, like many I've known."

"Oh no, I won't do that, Tato!" I said. "I won't run home! It won't be too tough for me!"

"Then God bless you," he said abruptly. "In the name of God, go ahead."

"Oh, Tato . . ."

I threw my arms around him and hugged and kissed him. "Think of all those prayers," I said. "A nun praying all those prayers for you."

"I'll need them," he said.

Suddenly I could feel his cheek wet against mine. For the first time then I realized how much it had meant for him to say yes.

In the next few days I got together my birth certificate and doctor's certificate of health and letter of character from the priest and the other things you had to take with you when entering the convent. Tato went to see his cousin



and borrowed the money for my convent dowry. He came back and handed me a thousand-crown bill—the first bill of that size I'd ever seen, much less touched. I was terrified about losing it, so I made a little bag with a drawstring, put it on a thick string around my neck, and stuffed the bag inside my blouse. Then one day I said good-bye. It would be six-and-a-half years before I could come home again, and everybody cried, Tato especially.

"God bless you, my child," Tato said. "Be good and obey the rules—be a good nun."

## 4

### SIX AND A HALF YEARS OF TESTING

Now came six and a half years of trial and testing to see if I could be a nun, from the time I was seventeen to over twenty-three. A long series of tests and trials, each of which you had to pass before you could go on to the next one. The tests were these:

Six months of first trial as a postulant, and if you passed you became a novice.

One year as a novice, and then you took the first vows.

Another year, and you renewed your vows.

Four more years, and then the final vows.

During the different periods of the six and a half years the tests made of you were different, as were your tasks and

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your religious habit. But in all the schedule was very exact. For the first six months as a postulant your "trial clothes" were an ordinary white blouse, black skirt, white bonnet. The schedule was:

5.00 a.m.—we got out of bed in our room. We slept four to a room. It was a very plain room, with light blue walls and white ceiling. At one end was a large black Cross, with a white Christ hanging from it. On one side of the room was a picture of Saint Theresa, who was a nun, and on the other, Saint Aloysius, who was the patron saint of young people. Our beds were metal cots, two feet apart, with night tables between where we kept a toothbrush, a towel, and slippers. Our other clothes, which we got as we needed them from the sister directress of postulants, were all jointly in one large cupboard at the opposite end of the room from the white Christ on the black Cross.

5.15 a.m.—we went to the chapel for vocal prayers and meditation. First, we knelt and prayed. Then we sat and thought about one thing, such as the life of some saint, which the Sister Directress had told us to think about that day. It is sometimes hard for young girls just to sit and think immediately after getting out of bed. Some of us sometimes dozed when we were supposed to be thinking.

6.00-6.30 a.m.—the priest celebrated Mass in the chapel.

6.30-7.00 a.m.—breakfast of coffee and a piece of rye bread.

7.00-12.00 noon—work. As postulants, ours was to take care of the children of the "Masaryk League"—these were children whose mothers had tuberculosis. The children, in age from birth to three years, stayed in the convent, and we cared for them. We fed them, washed them, changed

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their nappies, washed their clothes, cleaned their rooms, scrubbed the floors. In all our work, and throughout the day except for two periods, we were not permitted to talk except when absolutely necessary.

12.00-12.30 p.m.—lunch of soup and a vegetable. Still no talking.

12.30-1.30 p.m.—rest period, though we on trial called it “talking time”. We could go out into the garden and skip or play some ball game. Or we could talk, which was what we did most of all. For a seventeen-year-old girl to keep silent is one of the hardest things of all. Sometimes my tongue had been hanging out all morning wanting to say something! During this rest period I could say it. But the moment the bell rang at one-thirty you had to stop, even if your tongue was halfway out of your mouth saying something!

1.30-2.00 pm.—we knelt in the chapel and said silent prayers.

2.00-2.15 p.m.—religious readings from Mother Superior. These were on how you are supposed to live in the convent, the rules of our religious community, the meaning of being a nun, how life in the convent is not easy, but how not everyone has that opportunity, but has to be chosen by God, and how your reward comes when you get to heaven.

2.15-4.00 p.m.—looking after the children again.

4.00-4.15 p.m.—we went to the dining-room and had coffee and a piece of rye bread, or, in the summer, a piece of fruit, like a peach or a pear.

4.15-6.30 p.m.—we prepared supper for the children and carried it to them on trays and fed them.

6.30-7.00 p.m.—we went to the chapel and knelt, and

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the priest gave Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament while we sang *Tantum Ergo*, the hymn of praise to Our Lord sung during Benediction.

7.00 p.m.—supper of a piece of salami, a roast potato, a vegetable, a bun, cocoa. We twelve on trial sat at the foot of the table. Mother Superior sat at the head. The seventy sisters sat on the side. No talking.

7.30-7.35 p.m.—brief silent prayer in the chapel.

7.35-8.30 p.m.—after the brief prayer, we burst out of the chapel like a bunch of buzzing bees and ran downstairs. For now we had fifty-five minutes when we could talk without stopping, in the garden in the summer, in our common room in the winter. There were just us there, for we postulants were kept apart from the sisters except at mealtime. We talked and talked and talked our heads off, but instantly the bell rang, we had to stop.

8.30-9.00 p.m.—vocal prayers, kneeling in the chapel.

9.00 p.m.—to bed. The Sister Directress came round to make sure everyone was in bed.

The Sister Directress, she was the one who watched over us and enforced the rules. She made sure particularly that we didn't talk except the two times a day when it was allowed. She told us how once in a previous class of postulants a fire broke out in their quarters and they even put the fire out without saying a word. This was held up as the perfect model of discipline, and she hoped that we were that good. I hoped we were not put to that test and had no fire. It was extremely important not to talk except during the two periods. Actually you were learning it now, while on trial, as a discipline to continue all during your time in the convent, for the rule against talking except when neces-

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sary applies, not just to those on trial, but to all the sisters as well. The Sister Directress explained the reason for this rule.

"When people keep quiet," she said, "God has a chance to talk."

Then the six months were gone, and we entered into our novitiate for one year. We put on our novices' clothes. These were considerably nearer to the nun's habit than the trial clothes, though still some distance away. They were all black, with a black skirt and black apron, except for the top part—a white bonnet which was not a full bonnet like a nun's, but only came down to the ears; a starched collar, but not split like the nun's collar; a white veil instead of the nun's black veil; and no cloak such as a nun has.

We got dressed in these and we went into the chapel, and the priest celebrated the Mass for the novices starting out. Then he gave a discourse.

"You're stepping with one foot into the life of the convent," he said.

Then, starting this year of novice's life, we had the novitiate breakfast. And instead of a piece of bread, we got a piece of pastry.

The novice's year was the hardest of all. The testing got harder. We lived entirely apart, in a building separate from the sisters. We didn't eat with the sisters. We couldn't even talk with the sisters except on permission of Mother Superior. A Mistress of Novices was in charge of us to enforce all rules. Now we had children from the children's clinic to care for in the convent, where they had been brought because they had long sicknesses, such as having to stay in casts for a long time. We cared for them and did

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everything for them, feeding them, washing their clothes—everything. Also, we worked in the kitchen and the garden, scrubbed the floors, and made embroidered covers for the convent altars and embroidered clothes for the priests celebrating the Mass. We got much more schooling now, too, many more talks from the Mother Superior and the priest, the Father Superior, about what it is to be a nun, about goodness and kindness and about the three promises of obedience, poverty, and chastity which a nun must make, and their meaning. The day was very busy—it was amazing how much they could find to put in one day. At night you touched your bed and were asleep almost before you were under the covers.

All during this year we were being prepared for our first vows. We learned the rules of our community. Most people have only ten commandments to obey. We learned that we have 397, which is the number in our book of rules.

Over and over again we were tried and tested to see if we were learning what we were taught. Especially we were given tests, and some strange ones, to see if we were going to obey and therefore could be nuns.

One day we were out in the garden planting some cabbage plants.

"Plant the cabbage plants so that the roots are upward." the Mistress said.

This was shocking, especially to a farm girl like me. I decided this Mistress had never been near a farm, and I was about to instruct her in the proper way of planting cabbage plants. My mouth was almost open—then I took the cabbage plant and planted it with the roots upwards. Just in time I had realized this was a test of obedience.

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She had a very fruitful mind, had the Mistress of Novices, in thinking up tests for us. Sometimes she would tell us to sew something. After we sewed it, she would tell us, "Take it apart." She would tell us to clean a room by first wiping off all the dust, then sweeping the carpets. Doing it this way will only raise the dust again, but it was a test to see if we could obey. She told us to put flowers in a vase to put on the altar, but not to put water in the vase. Loving flowers and wanting to see them stay alive as long as possible, I thought that time I had misunderstood her.

"Did you say no water in the vase?" I asked.

"Don't ask me questions when I tell you something," she said. "Remember, you're a novice."

For everything you did wrong, there were punishments.

Once, while working in the kitchen, I was playing about with another novice and broke a dish. For that I had to kneel down during a religious reading in the classroom and for fifteen minutes hold the broken plate, one piece in each hand, in front of the others. Here there was no getting away with broken dishes as in the case of Ignac and Grandma's broken crockery dish when I was a little girl. The usual punishment if you did something wrong was that you had to eat on your knees, holding your plate in your hands. It is not a very relaxing way to eat, but you remember what you did wrong.

One of my worst tests was once when I was scrubbing the corridor and had got it all clean after some hard scrubbing, but the floor was still wet. Just then the Mistress of Novices walked right through it, making footmarks all over it. I was boiling inside. "Couldn't she find a better place to walk?" I said furiously—to myself. I stayed there on my knees,

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though, cooling off, and scrubbing up her tracks. Then she came back and walked right through it again. "If she wasn't the Mistress of Novices I would tell her off," I said in a rage—to myself. I stayed there cooling off, and scrubbing up again. Then down the hall came another sister—not the Mistress—and this one walked right through it, too. This was too much. I looked up in a fury from where I was scrubbing on my knees.

"Is this the only place in the whole convent you can find to walk?" I yelled, "Can't you find a better place?"

I felt much better. You were certainly not supposed to say things like that to sisters. But after all, I thought, she is only a plain sister, she is not the Mistress of Novices.

Later that morning in classroom I was horrified when the Mistress of Novices called me in front of the class and started telling me off. *She*, it turned out, had sent the other sister through as a further test of me. There in front of all the other novices she gave me a thorough dressing-down.

"You did three things wrong," she said. "First of all, you aren't supposed to talk at all. Second, you aren't supposed to talk to a sister ever. Third, why should a novice get excited?"

I loved it, the convent that is. I would get mad at times, but I loved the convent. I didn't care about the outside world, so it was not hard for me. Not too hard, that is. I got happier all the time. Some dropped out, but I never for one second thought about dropping out. Then our novitiate year was over.

The time for our first vows, when we would take our holy vows for a year, drew near. This was the first big ceremony for one trying to be a nun. It was the time when



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you would really begin to commit yourself to this life of a nun. The feeling is not too bad if you leave the convent before the first vows, but it is bad to leave it after that. In preparation for our vows, we spent eight days in retreat. A retreat master came, and talked to us during the morning. These talks were about what we were about to do and the meaning of it. Then we prayed four hours every afternoon. And during all these eight days we could not speak one word. This is harder than you think. Sometime try going for eight days without saying one word.

At last arrived the day for taking our first vows and for the ceremony of the investiture. It was an immense day, and all the parents of the novices came to Bratislava to see it. My Mamicka was ill and could not come, but Tato came and three of my sisters—you were allowed to invite four. It was the first time I had seen them in a year and a half, though I could not see them until after the ceremony. But they were seated in the chapel with the others, waiting for the ceremony.

The novices were dressed all in white, like brides. Then, every one carrying a lighted candle, we entered the chapel. Two by two we walked down the aisle to the front of the altar. And the priest, the Father Superior, spoke to us.

"Is your mind really made up, and do you have a strong will to stay in the convent?"

"Yes, Father," we said.

"Do you have strength enough in you to obey all the rules which this convent will require?"

I'm sure all of us immediately thought of those 397 rules—I know I did. But we replied: "With God's help, we hope we can obey everything."

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"Do you want to change all the happiness in the outside world for the convent?" the priest asked. "Do you want to be brides of Jesus?"

And all of us in one voice gave back the answer.

"May we have the nuns' habit?"

Then, one by one, we stepped up to the priest. He cut a lock of our hair and put it on a tray of gold, for this represented our giving up all the luxuries of the world, since in the days of the Bible hair was the luxury of a woman.

On a table in front of the altar were our new clothes, all folded up in long piles, each pile with a name on it. They were the habits of the nun, except that we would not get the Cross and the ring at this ceremony. The piles of clothes did not include the black veil, which was kept separate.

After he had cut the locks of our hair, the priest blessed the habits. Then again he called our names one by one. We stepped forward and knelt at the altar. The priest placed in our outstretched arms one of the piles of the religious habits.

Then we went back up the aisle and out of the chapel. We dressed ourselves in our new habits. Then, two by two and wearing the new habits, but still wearing the white veil of the novice, we came back in.

Now the priest gave each of us a copy of the book of rules of our community. Then a medal, with Saint Augustine on one side and on the other, the Blessed Virgin holding the baby Jesus. I kissed the medal, and he put it around my neck. Then he took the black veil of a nun, and I kissed it. Then the priest placed the black veil over my white veil.

Once more we went out of the chapel. We took off our white veils and left on just the black veil. We took a burn-

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ing candle in our hand, each of us, and the priest led us down the aisle. And suddenly the organ broke into the great swelling sounds of the Magnificat, and all around us the nuns started singing it until a mighty sound filled the air.

We went to our seats at the front and blew out our candles and the Mass started. Then the priest gave us a talk, telling us that we had made the first step of taking the garb of the bride of Jesus and that in the coming year we must examine ourselves further as to whether we wanted to stay the rest of our lives in the convent. He thanked the parents for giving a child back to God. And he said that everything on earth is short and heaven is for ever.

Then the Mass was over. Now I was a young nun, and feeling, in these *reholne rucho*, these reverend clothes, the happiest I had ever been. I ran into the arms of my Tato.

"It's very nice the way it worked out," he said.

I think he was a little proud of me.

Another year passed, and we renewed our vows in another ceremony. Now we were very deeply committed. Before this ceremony there were another eight days of spiritual exercises. Then came the ceremony. This time my Mamicka could come, which made me very happy, and for my other three I invited Tato, my aunt, and my grandma whose crockery dish I broke that time without her knowing it. The priest asked us if we had examined ourselves further during this year, and we said "yes". Then we prostrated ourselves before the altar, burying ourselves, becoming dead to the world. The Mistress of Novices had told us that if we would think of three things while we were prostrated, really think of them from the bottom of our hearts, God would give them to us. So I had prepared my three things,

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and while prostrated at the altar I thought of them: First, I want to be in the convent the rest of my days until I die, and I prayed God to give me the strength to pass the rest of the trials to be a nun. Second, I asked God that I may never through all my life hurt Him with heavy sins. Third, I asked God to give me health so I can work for the good of the convent and the good of the people and the glory of God.

We rose, and now we were dead to the world. We were given lighted candles, and the priest spoke to us.

"Do you have the will to promise faithfully all the three promises—of poverty, obedience, and chastity? If so, step to the front of God's altar and promise to God, Who will one day be your Judge."

One by one we stepped forward and knelt.

"I, Cecilia, promise that I will stay, poor, chaste and will obey."

From a table the priest took a Cross and blessed it and held it for me to kiss. Then he put it round my neck.

From a table he took a bridal wreath and blessed that. And he placed this upon my head—and now I was the Bride of Christ.

All day long we wore the bridal wreath and showed our families around the convent and through the garden, where the flowers were all blooming, and I was very proud in my religious habit. Then the families all came to the big convent dining-room, and we young nuns served them dinner. Tato was wearing his best dark suit, though with no tie, which he always refused to wear. I was very proud to serve them, and it was a big dinner. Good beef soup, breaded meat cutlets and several other kinds of meat, vegetables,

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cakes, and there was even beer to drink, at which Tato was quite surprised.

"I didn't realize you had beer in a convent," he said.

"This is a special occasion, so we serve it to our guests," I said.

He looked up with an idea. "Maybe they could use some of my wine."

I tactfully wardèd off this offer.

At the end of the dinner Tato got up to make a speech to everybody. He would always make a speech when a few people got together.

"It is a very beautiful day for all of us," he told all the relatives seated at the tables and the young nuns who had been serving and now were standing around in their bridal wreaths listening. "It is beautiful not just for our daughters but for us parents as well, that we were able to raise a child and give it to God to His honour. They are good Slovak sisters, every one of them. I pray that God will bless them, and I hope that though they won't be able to help us with our work on the farm, that they will be able to help us with their prayers."

And he sat down, and everybody clapped, I was very proud of my Tato.

It was four more years now before the final vows. From the three things our congregation does—nursing, caring for the aged, teaching children—we had to choose. I, of course, chose children. I entered upon my course of preparation. The first of these four years I went to the regular Government school and took courses in teaching. The second year I continued this, but also did practice-teaching in the first to the fifth forms of the state schools, teaching religion

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mostly. The third year I took my examinations for a kindergarten certificate. The fourth, I started helping the regular teacher to teach in the convent kindergarten and now was looking forward very much to when I would have my own class. Also, in one of these years I took a course in nursing, just to have that, too. Maybe God or Saint Joseph was looking ahead to the time when the Communists would forbid us to teach any more, but would let us continue nursing. I took this course in the same hospital to which so many years later I was to go after the Communists stopped nuns teaching.

Each year we renewed our vows. The schedule was rigorous during these four years before we would be fully nuns, and we were watched over very directly by Mother Superior herself. She had always been a little forbidding to me, like someone living far off and breathing another kind of air, until a Sunday afternoon one winter. That afternoon some of us sisters were playing in the garden in the snow. A few of us made a nice snowman. Then some more sisters came and made the snowman bigger. More kept coming and making it still bigger until finally there were sixty sisters, and the snowman got to be very big. Then some of the sisters knocked the snowman down and started jumping over him, and suddenly we started throwing snow happily at each other. When our hands got too cold, some of us got coal shovels and started throwing snow at the other sisters with the coal shovels. Two hours of this and we were wet and dirty and happy, and finally Mother Superior came out.

"That's enough now," she said. "You look like wet chickens. Now go in and change."

However, she stayed awhile and threw snow with us like

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everyone else. Then we gave her a ride on the sleigh, which I was in the lead pulling. Only instead of sitting down, she stood up. I must have pulled the sleigh a little fast. Suddenly Mother Superior fell right off and sprawled in the snow. I was terrified.

I ran up to her and helped her up. "Forgive me, Mother Superior! I must have pulled too hard."

"Not at all," she said, brushing off the snow. "I should have had sense enough to sit down."

And suddenly she laughed. She was very kind, and after that I felt much closer to her.

Still, she was strict, for our own good, and punished us when we needed to be. She taught us especially the meaning of being a nun, the meaning of the three vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity which a nun takes.

"Poverty," she would say. "That means you work all your life and get no reward for it. For all the rest of your life you have no right to own anything. No right to have money, no matter how hard you work for it, and even if someone should give you a reward for your work—still you cannot keep anything out of it, but must turn it all over to the convent. Not a penny can be kept. Even if it is for something you think you need. If you need anything, we will give you money. And for everything you spend you must have permission—even if it is only a postage stamp.

So if we got anything, we had to give it to Mother Superior, who might or might not give it back. Once I was given a beautiful small leather purse with my name pressed on it. It was a gift from the parents of one of the children I was beginning to help teach in the kindergarten. I took it to Mother Superior.

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"Have you another purse?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, and then added, "but it is old."

"But you have one," she said, and I had to leave the new one. I thought timidly of suggesting giving her the old one and my keeping the new, but I didn't.

And so I learned the ways of a nun.

She taught us the meaning of obedience. "Freedom is the best thing you have in this world," she said. "And you give that up, too. But your reward comes after you die."

Though in truth the reward comes partly while you are alive from your happiness in the convent.

"Obedience," I used to think, "and to think of those 397 rules in our book which we have to obey as against only the Ten Commandments for most people." Though one pope was supposed to have said, "Show me one nun who obeys everything in this book, and I will pronounce her a saint to-day."

Obedience: like having to be in bed every night by nine. Once I had been working very hard in the kindergarten, but I still had some extra work. I went to Mother Superior and asked permission to work late that night. "No," she said, "you're going to bed." And she was right, for I had been working too hard.

A strict life. Still, I wouldn't want to be outside. Outside I could see everybody was worrying. Here in the convent there was no worrying. I've got nothing and I've got everything. I've got no worry and instead I've got peace in me—and also wherever I go, I've got a roof over my head, a bed to sleep on, food for my mouth. Anything I need, I just go to Mother Superior, and she tells me if I need it. If I do,



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she gives it to me. Nothing to worry about. This is a great thing. Sometimes I think if people knew how happy it was in the convent, all the world would go in the convent. But God, I suppose, doesn't give it to all people to go in the convent for the reason that then the world would be destroyed—someone has to stay outside the convent and multiply the world.

It was a pretty convent, ours, with its buildings and courtyard and garden filling almost a whole block. It was located prettily at 6 Jakubovo Square and 34-36 Grosslingova Street, with the main convent building on the square. There were six buildings—the main building, the nuns' living quarters, the kindergarten building, the old-age home for pensioners, a small hospital, and the novitiate building—all of them enclosing a beautiful courtyard and garden teeming with flowers and nut, fruit, and other trees. It was a place I would never want to leave, and I looked forward to spending all my life there, teaching in that kindergarten building. It was a place both of peace and of work—and of joy and, yes, of fun.

Yes, there is fun in a convent, certainly if it is the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour, who are not stiff and solemn at all. Three days before Lent Mother Superior let all the sisters do almost anything they liked. So we'd have a party in the convent and dress up in costumes which we would make ourselves, and dance and sing and have lots of fun, and every sister would do the funniest thing she could think of, like on a stage. One nun would play a deaf woman, and every time anyone asked her the same thing she would give a different answer. Once I played a little act of selling a rooster. I had a real live rooster and kept talking to the

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rooster and answering for him, a sort of nun's ventriloquy act.

Oh yes, we had fun! And there were many things to do. Like the attempted capture of the bees 'who weren't doing anything.

In our convent garden stood a big walnut tree whose branches leaned over a wall into the yard of a man next door. We used to see lots of bees on those branches.

"Those bees are just sitting there doing nothing," I said one day to two other sisters named Eva and Gertruda. "It seems such a waste of honey."

We thought this over a little bit.

"Wouldn't it be nice," I said, "to take the bees to our farm?"

The convent had a nice farm outside Bratislava, in a little valley just where the Carpathian Mountains started.

"That would be nice," said Sister Eva. "But I'm not sure the bees would come if we just invited them."

"Then we'll help them," I said. "I have an idea. But first we'll have to ask the man next door. After all, even if the trunk of the tree is in our yard, the branches are in his. And it is on the branches that the bees are."

So we went and asked the man, and he said he would be delighted for us to have the bees.

"But I don't know how you will get them," he said. "They seem pretty happy where they are, on those branches."

That was our problem, I told him politely. "But have you a ladder and a rope we can borrow?" I asked.

Our neighbour looked a little puzzled, but said he would be delighted for us to use his rope and ladder. He liked his

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next-door neighbours at the convent and was on very good terms with the sisters.

We went back, and I related my plan for the bee capture to the other two sisters and made the arrangements.

"You, Sister Eva," I instructed her, "will climb up the ladder to the top of the wall and tie a rope to one of the branches. You, Sister Gertruda, will climb up the ladder and stand at the top of it holding a box."

"I might fall off," said Sister Gertruda.

"To see that you don't is my job," I said. "I will stand at the bottom of the ladder and hold it steady."

So we got a large cardboard box and borrowed the man's ladder and rope and put the ladder up against the wall on his side of it.

Sister Eva climbed to the top of the wall and very carefully, so as not to disturb the resting bees, tied a rope around one of the branches of the walnut tree.

Sister Gertruda climbed to the top of the ladder and stood there on the next to the top rung holding the box.

On his back porch the man sat smoking a pipe and watching with great interest.

I stood at the bottom of the ladder holding it to steady Sister Gertruda.

"Go!" I said.

Violently Sister Eva started jerking the rope, making all the branches flutter. Sure enough, the bees came shooting off the branches, according to plan. At the top of the ladder Sister Gertruda held the big cardboard box open for the bees to come in. And, sure enough, in they started coming. All according to plan.

Then suddenly, not according to plan, I saw the box

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coming my way. Before I could dodge, it had cracked me on the head. The box must have got too heavy for Sister Gertruda, or maybe she lost her balance. Anyhow, out from the box flew the bees, very angry at being disturbed and swarming noisily over my head. Down from the ladder scurried Sisters Eva and Gertruda, and more of the bees swarmed over them. Frantically we held up our aprons to protect our faces. We ran towards a well in the man's back yard, the swarms of bees going with us, indeed on us. Tremendous swarms.

From nearby I thought I heard the man laughing at the top of his voice, though I could not see him, for I was holding my apron tight over my face because of the bees. Then suddenly I felt cold water being poured all over me. Then I could see out a little and see the man was drawing pails of water from the well. Then I could feel more torrents of cold water as he doused the three of us nuns to get the bees to leave us, which they at last did.

"What an extraordinary way to get bees!" the man said, and started laughing until I thought his stomach would split. "Oh, what an . . ."

Some of the bees, I noticed, had settled in the water pail. Quickly I picked up a little rag which was lying on the edge of the well and covered them.

"May we borrow the pail?" I asked our neighbour.

"Yes, yes!" he said, laughing again until there were tears coming from his eyes, "Oh yes, of course . . . take it, take it!" And he went off to his house, laughing at the top of his voice.

Pretty wet, but carrying the pail, we went back to the convent. We took the pail to a vacant room in the convent

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and locked the door. I guessed we had perhaps a dozen bees in that pail. We thought next morning we would take them to the farm.

Next morning when we went to the room to look, we found bees flying all over the room and had to duck again. They had slipped out from under the rag.

"Well . . ." I sighed.

So I did what we all knew was the only thing left to do. I opened the window. The bees flew out. They went straight back to the walnut tree and started sitting on its branches.

We tried to learn how to be good nuns. It took a lot of practice to learn the discipline of it. Particularly the obedience lessons Mother Superior taught. I would sometimes do things, without thinking, that I shouldn't.

Once I took some flowers from the garden where we weren't supposed to take them. They were so pretty. I thought they would look even prettier on the table of the kindergarten children's First Communion breakfast that morning. The sister who tended the flowers found out about it and told Mother Superior.

"Mother Superior," she went in and told her, "the most beautiful flowers are missing from the garden. Sister Cecilia took them."

So in front of the other sisters, Mother Superior reprimanded me.

"If you had asked," she told me, "you could have had the flowers. But you should have asked."

Which was right. But I was furious with the sister who told, for I have never liked tell-tales, in or out of a convent. So I decided I would deal with her.

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In our nursing class, where we studied the things we learned in the hospital, there was a skull, a real human skull. So I borrowed this skull, also without asking anyone. Before bed, while the sister who had told on me about the flowers was still out of the sleeping room, I went to her bed. I got some cardboard and stuffed it in a nun's clothes and put the stuffed clothes into the bed, under the covers, so that a person would seem to be sleeping there. Then I arranged the skull on the pillow so that it appeared to be the head of the sleeping person. Then around the skull I draped a nun's veil, very beautifully, so that it would appear to be a sister sleeping there. Then I closed the white curtains which each sister's bed had round it.

I sat back and waited for that sister to come.

About eight forty-five, when we were all getting ready for bed and the room was full of nuns, she came in. She went over and pulled back the curtains.

A horrifying scream rang through the nuns' sleeping room.

"Jesus Mary Joseph!" the sister in charge of the flowers screamed. "There's a dead person in my bed! A dead nun!"

The other sisters came running over. There was some more screaming, but then one sister pulled back the covers. And suddenly the screams had turned to long peals of squealing laughter.

That sister, however, went running to Mother Superior again. And pretty soon there was Mother Superior standing in the door.

She went over and picked up the skull with the nun's veil on it, and turned around. I thought maybe I could see just the flicker of a smile even around Mother Superior's lips

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as she stood there before all of us nuns holding the draped skull. But when she spoke there was not much of a smile in her voice.

"Who did it?" she said crisply.

No one said anything. They all knew I had done it, but no one spoke a word.

"Very well," Mother Superior said, "in that case all of you will have to kneel down and eat on your knees until you decide you know who did it—even if it's for a whole year."

The future of seventy sisters doing our eating on our knees for a year stretched out appallingly in front of me.

"I did it, Mother," I said.

So I had to go and ask each sister's forgiveness for spoiling the time of quietness before bed. And I had to eat three times at supper kneeling and with my plate in my hands. But the sister who tended the flowers never told on me again after finding a dead person's skull in her bed. I asked her forgiveness too about disturbing the time of quietness, and having done what I was supposed to, I told her what would happen if she told tales again.

"Next time," I said, "I'll give you a real dead person in your bed."

I was very happy in the convent. Then one day the six and a half years were all over, and I took the final vows. I knelt in front of the altar, and the priest officially received my vows.

"I promise you, Cecilia, in the name of our Holy Saviour, the Son of the All Holy God," he said, "if you serve him

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truly and honestly, you will be crowned for ever. Take this ring of your religion as the mark of the Holy Ghost and be named always as a Bride of God."

And I kissed the ring, and he placed it upon the second finger of my right hand. A real ring of gold, with *Iesu Hominum Salvator* engraved on the inside, not the kind I used to get as a girl in cat-in-the-bag.

Now I was a grown nun. And in the nun's clothes, with a holy vow to wear them always. Which I did, until for a while because of the Communist police, Holy Saviour said, "Cecilia, now, but for this little season of hiding, you must take them off."

I went home for a visit. My heart was beating harder and harder as I got near the village, and when finally I looked out of the train window and saw it, I didn't know whether I was sitting or standing. It had been six-and-a-half-years since I had seen this village where I grew up and where as a child I had played nuns. Now here I was back, wearing a nun's habit myself. Six and a half years—I was changed, but not changed, too, I thought, looking out of the window. It was both, and both were good.

There was a big celebration for me coming back. For the four days I was home the house was filled with people. Tato was very happy—I think he was almost in seventh heaven, having a daughter as a nun to show off. Also, he was happy to have so many people to offer his wine to. All the older people brought *kolache* and cakes and eggs. I had been a little worried for fear the people of the village might be a little distant and awed with my nun's clothes and stand off calling me "Sister". But the older people were not awed in the slightest.



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"Girl," they would say, "you're very lucky to be a nun. I knew you from a little wee cork'."

The children were shy at first. They wouldn't even come in the house, but would stand with their noses against the window looking in at the nun. They nearly pushed the windows in with their noses. But when I would go out to see them, since they wouldn't come in, they would all take off like shy little rabbits. It was just like I had been with nuns when I was little, too much in awe to get close. Then I remembered Father Stefan, our village priest. So after a day or so I approached the children holding out some sweets. After a while they came a little closer, then they reached out and took the sweets, and soon we were laughing and playing together.

While I was home, Tato showed me around and pointed out everything that had happened on the farm while I had been away. The biggest thing was that one room in the house, the living-room, which was also Tato's and Mammicka's bedroom, now had a wooden floor, which he was very proud of. He showed me the young calves and pigs which had come since I left. He seemed very proud as he took me around the farm, and almost respectful, and I knew he wasn't altogether sure whether to treat me as his daughter or as a nun.

One day as he was taking me around the farm, it was very hot, a blazing day in July. Tato seemed rather shy about something, and finally I asked him if there was anything wrong.

"My dear daughter," he burst out with it, "you are sweating in that habit."

And so I was, intensely.

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"My dear daughter," Tato said, "now, that you are home, you can change into some clothes more comfortable than your nun's habit."

And he said that a little less shyly, as if he was not sure whether he was my Tato speaking to his daughter or someone speaking to a nun, but was about to be sure. I laughed.

"Tato," I said, "I can't change from my religious habit."

"And why not!" he said gruffly, and now he was all Tato, my Tato, telling his little daughter what clothes to wear.

I smiled, "No, Tato. This is the way I have to be. I have to be like a good soldier. A soldier can't take off his uniform. Not if he's a good soldier."

He made a sharp gesture to my bonnet and veil. "At least take these off, for heaven's sake—and be comfortable!"

"Tato," I said, "a soldier can't be part soldier and part something else."

He made a heavy sigh. "Well, I wouldn't stand it. Not in this heat."

I went around the village and saw all the people I had always known. One day on the street I ran into a man I didn't recognize, and he stopped me.

"Don't you know me?" he said.

I looked at him, a grey, bent man.

"Aren't you the one who stole the poppy seeds?" he said.

It was the watchman of the pasture! I bowed my head and blushed, even then.

"Yes," I admitted it.

"I'll never forget that!" he said. "How you knelt down in the fields and prayed so I wouldn't punish you—I never saw a child pray Our Father in heaven as hard as you prayed that

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day when you knelt down in front of me. I bet you haven't prayed harder since.

He looked at me in my nun's habit and laughed a little.

"Well, anyhow, you grew up well," he said. "I imagine it was right to let you go."

## 5

### THE HAPPY YEARS

**N**ow I was a nun, and for seventeen years I taught my lovely little children—before the Communists came and decided it was evil for me to teach. I have added it up that I taught 1,200 children altogether, so that perhaps there is something there even the Communists can never take away. Oh, what happy years they were!

I taught the children of the kindergarten, four and five and six years old. I loved my kindergarten classroom, full of light through its French doors all along one side. The doors opened into the garden and a large sand pit for the children. On the room's light green walls were painted children's things, toys and little boats, and dolls and little trains, and little boys riding bicycles and playing ball. The walls were hung, too, with religious pictures, including a large picture of Jesus and the children which hung right above my desk at the front. My children sat on little chairs in front of me. When the time came to draw pictures, we

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brought round tables from the back of the room and set them up, and the children sat around these and did their drawings.

Some of my children came from rich homes and some from homes that were very poor. But I found a way so that as long as they were in my class, there would be no difference in the poor and the rich, for children are all the same. This was to have them wear in class little white smocks which almost covered them. That way they looked nice and pretty and white, and there was no difference in the poorer and the richer. I had them take off their shoes and wear little slippers, too, so that the classroom would always be clean. I like cleanliness. I made bags for them with hangers to keep their smocks and a little pouch in the bag for their slippers. On each bag I pasted a different picture so they could recognize which was theirs. "You be a house," I would tell one. "You be an apple. You be a duck."

I wouldn't let anyone enter my classroom wearing shoes. I wore slippers, too. So did anyone else who set foot in my classroom. There was a priest living at the convent. Father Matej, who published a large Catholic newspaper. Many years later I was to smuggle him across the border and away from the Communists. I made even Father Matej wear slippers when he came in my classroom. One time Father Matej had a visitor, another priest, to whom he wanted to show my classroom, and when the two priests came down the corridor to visit it, Father Matej spoke to his friend.

"Take your shoes off," he told the priest.

"What's that?" the visitor-priest said.

"If you don't," Father Matej said, "she'll chase you right out."

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At first the visitor-priest thought Father Matej was making a joke, but Father Matej assured him he wasn't.

"No, it isn't a convent rule," Father Matej said. "It's *her* rule."

So the two priests took their shoes off and came in and visited my classroom.

I taught the children with stories and games and practice, never with theory and very little with books. I taught them that flowers are pretty, but that they must be given tenderness. I told them a story about a girl who tore a flower growing in a garden and the flower died and the bees couldn't get any honey from it. I took them out in our convent garden and told them how a flower was just like a human being and had to have water to drink or it would die. I got them to practice this thoroughly themselves, giving the flowers water and seeing that then they would grow.

I taught them how to eat. I taught them not to throw banana peels away, but to put them in the refuse-bin. There was an old man, I told them, who slipped on a banana peel and died. "Would you want your Tato to die from slipping on a banana peel?" They all shook their little heads very vigorously and put their banana peels in the refuse-bin.

I taught them how to be careful with their toys at home and to put them away when they had finished playing with them. "Once," I told them, "there was a little girl who didn't put her toys away, and the toys came to life and walked away. The doll said she wasn't going to stay because the girl tore her hair. The toy knight said he wasn't going to stay because she broke his leg. The toy dog wasn't going to stay because she pulled his tail. So the little girl woke up

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crying, and when her mother asked why she was crying, she said, 'Because the toys went away.'

I taught them neatness and cleanliness. When the little boys didn't want to wash their hands, I had a story about that, too. "There was a boy who dreamed that his fingers wanted to go away because he didn't wash them. The thumb said, 'I'm going away and be a cork.' The forefinger said, 'I'm going to be a clock and show the time.' The middle finger said, 'I'm strong, so I'm going to the farmer and work on the farm.' The ring finger said, 'I'm going to hang myself on the wall and show everybody how beautiful I am.' The little finger said, 'I'm going to hide myself in the matchbox.' And all the little boy's fingers went away. And the little boy started to cry at night. 'I have no fingers,' he cried. 'How am I going to eat? How am I going to write? How am I going to play with the other children?' So he promised his fingers he would take good care of them if they came back, and wash them all the time and keep them clean, and he would do anything if they would only stay with him."

One day after I had told this story, I saw the mother of one of my little boys on the street, and she told me that her boy, with whom she had always had great trouble getting him to wash his hands, suddenly was washing them all the time. And all he would tell her when she asked what had happened to him was, "Sister told us a story."

Sometimes, though, I would forget and repeat a story. The children would pull me up at once.

"Oh, Sister," they'd say, "you told us that story last year."

The wonderful children!

And they had questions.

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I taught them how Jesus was born in a lowly manger in a barn. He was once a small one, too, and was poor.

"Sister," one little girl said, and held up a card of the Nativity scene, "if they were poor, how did they have the money to have their picture taken?"

I told them how God had created man by taking a little bit of mud and blowing on it, and that then out of the mud came man walking and talking, having the spirit of God in him. Then I told them that when man died, he could no longer talk and walk for the reason that the spirit of God had gone out of him. I illustrated this point.

"Have you ever seen a dead person?" I asked the children.

"Yes, *Mila Sestricka*, Beloved Sister," said one little girl. "My grandma when she died."

"Could she talk?" I asked.

"No."

"Could she walk?"

"No."

"You see," I said. "The reason was that the spirit of God had gone away. When the spirit has gone away, man can neither talk nor walk, for he is only a little piece of mud again."

Next day I wanted to see if my children had remembered what I had told them the day before about the spirit of God and God blowing this spirit into man. I asked the class if they had remembered this story. One little girl raised her hand.

"I remember it, Sister!" she said. "God made man out of mud and blew spirit into him and after that God fell down and died."

I gave her the necessary corrections on this version.

"But, Sister," the little girl said, "if God gave His spirit

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to man He must have died because God had no spirit left because He'd given it away and the one without spirit dies, you said."

I taught them not to do things behind their mother's back or God would see them, even if their mother didn't, because God saw everywhere—underground, in darkness, everywhere. I wanted to prove that they had got this lesson of omnipresence.

"One little girl," I said, "went into the basement to taste some sour cream her mother had in a crock. It was all dark in the basement—but did God see her?"

Several of the children said no, and I was a little dismayed until one boy raised his hand. "Yes, God could see her all right."

Then I was encouraged that my lesson had got home, and I smiled. "And how could God see," I asked, "when it was all dark?"

"He put the lights on," the boy said.

I taught them songs I had learned as a little girl myself from Tato, such as the song about the wild duck that was shot by a hunter.

. . . And she cried bitterly,  
And sat down on the water . . .  
"I have finished my flying,  
And I have finished forever  
Feeding my small children."

And the children acted it out, flapping their arms like duck wings and sitting down and crying bitterly like the mother duck when it was hit—all like we had done with Tato.



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I taught them with stories and songs and by practice. We had little sandwiches and milk for the children every morning at ten, and I would appoint one child to clean up any crumbs that fell on the floor.

"Stepping on bread is wrong," I taught them.

After lunch we would draw flowers and cut them out and paste them on paper. We made rosaries and crosses out of straw we bought. For Saint Nicholas Day I made little slippers of celluloid and silk thread and filled them with sweets for the children, such as had been done for me on the farm when I was a child. One Saint Nicholas time one of my boys, Gusto, was ill, so I sent his slipper and sweets to him by another of my boys, Stanko. Both were five.

After Gusto came back to school, he never said anything about the slipper, and I wondered about this. After several days I asked him.

"Gusto, did you get the slipper full of sweets that Saint Nicholas left for you?"

"Slipper?" Gusto said. "I didn't get nothing."

I called Stanko over. "Stanko," I asked, "where did you take the slipper that I gave you that was filled with sweets?"

"Where did I take the slipper that you gave me that was filled with sweets?" Stanko said.

"Yes, what did you do with it?"

"What did I do with it?"

"Yes, I told you to give it to him," I said, pointing to Gusto.

"You told me to give it to him?" Stanko said, pointing to Gusto.

"Yes, did you give it to him?"

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Stanko looked at Gusto. "Yes," he said after a moment, "I did give it to him."

"You didn't give me anything," Gusto said.

"Yes, I did give it to you," Stanko said. He pointed to himself. "Didn't I give it to you?"

I saw we would never get to the end of it. Stanko himself looked surprised that he hadn't given the slipper to Gusto.

Once one of my little girls went to see some friends at lunch instead of going home as she was supposed to. Her mother came looking for her. When the girl got back, I talked to her.

"Where did you go to lunch?"

"Home," she said.

"What did you do at home?"

"I had lunch."

"What did you have for lunch?"

"Beans."

"You're not telling a story are you?"

"No-o-o."

"This is very strange, because your mother was here looking for you."

"Oh-h-h."

But I always liked bad little girls, or at least understood them. I had been enough of a bad little girl myself.

On the holy days I would take the children in the processions which the priests would lead through the city. The biggest procession was on the Feast of Corpus Christi when the priest would lead a procession two miles to the Church of the Sacred Heart and the children, including mine, would follow, strewing the streets with flowers. Coming back from the church on the old narrow cobblestone streets, I

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would talk to them about this city of Bratislava, and all its history going back to Roman times. But our biggest trip, just as it had been for me as a child, was the trip I took them on every May to the Shrine of Mary's Portion. Only instead of walking, as we did when I was a child, we took a bus at six-thirty in the morning. The children carried little rucksacks with their lunch over their shoulders, and most of them would be at the convent by 5 a.m. for fear they might miss this exciting trip, proudly clutching their money for the bus. I would tell them how I had been there as a child and tell them the story of the bandit whose little girl was healed at the spring and who then gave up robbing and from his loot gave a "portion for Mary".

Happy years! Busy years! Up at four-thirty for prayers, Mass, school preparation, breakfast at seven, school at eight. For a time also, from 1913 to 1914, I taught classes of deaf and dumb in the Government school in addition to my kindergarten children. These were older children, nine to twelve years, and for three hours a week I taught them religion. They had been taught to read lips, and I would form the words very slowly and use pictures. It was good to teach about God to those who could neither speak nor hear, and yet also had the spirit of God in them.

Then the Second World War came. In 1913 we started evacuating the children to the country, and by 1914 there was hardly a child left in Bratislava. In September 1915, when there were no more children left to teach, I nursed in the children's clinic, where were left some children too ill to move. During the air raids I would take one or two of the worst of my cases and get the older children to help the others, and we would all go down to the basement of the

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hospital. Then, as the front got nearer the city, even the sick children were evacuated. Then, as it got very near the city, the nuns left, too. I went, on the Saturday before Easter, to my home, to be with my family during whatever might happen.

The village had built a network of dugouts in the clay banks, enough at fifty per dugout to hold the whole village. My two sisters who were home and I prepared to go to one of the dugouts, but Tato refused to go.

"I'm not going to leave my home," he said. "Especially if things are going to get that bad. If I'm going to die, I want it to be in my own house."

So my two sisters and I joined the other villagers in the dugout, where we sat on heaps of potatoes, and the children sprawled in the straw, and we all waited for the bombings. On Resurrection morning we came out of the dugouts, as the Lord had done, and looked up into the sky and saw no bombers and praised Holy Saviour.

Two weeks later I went back to Bratislava and found the Russians in possession of the city. I stayed at the hospital a month, then when my children started straggling back I returned to the convent and opened up the school. I was happy to see them unharmed, and to be teaching again. At the first class we said a prayer for being saved from the war and began our lessons. The Russians were in the city only a few months and had nearly all gone by the time I started autumn classes in September 1915.

After the war we used to get UNRRA boxes at the convent, which helped us a great deal. We would use what was in them—the first time I ever ate anything out of a tin—and we ~~would~~ even use the boxes. We used the boxes in a little

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play which I got up for the parents to see their children in. The play opened with a bunch of the boxes in a row on the stage. Then from the wings of the stage emerged a boy dressed like a rabbit and carrying a drum. He hit the drum twelve times. At the twelfth beat, all the boxes popped open, and up came my little girls all dressed like dolls and looking as sweet. "Twelve o'clock struck and brought us to life," they said, then stepped out of the boxes and did a little dance I had taught them and sang:

We are small dolls -  
And mothers are buying us  
For the good children only.

When the Communists took over it seemed like a nightmare erupting suddenly into this goodness and happiness, as though they had popped suddenly out of evil boxes, as my children had popped out of good ones.



*Part Three*

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THE COMMUNISTS TAKE OVER

# 6

## THE EVICTION OF THE NUNS

THE seed, I suppose, had been there from the time the Russian Army occupied Czechoslovakia briefly after the Second World War. The Communists need little time to plant their seed, and once planted, it grows swiftly as weeds. One day you have a flower garden. You turn your back, and when you look again, the weeds are swarming over it, choking the flowers. Three years, 1915 to 1918, and then it was too late to stop the weeds. Sooner than anyone could have expected, the Communists were in power. February 1918. Red February.

The Communists always move in stages. They did so with the schools. In Slovakia religion was taught in all the schools. The Catholics had their own schools, conducted by various communities of sisters and priests and some by Catholic lay teachers, where they of course taught religion. In addition, nuns and priests went to the state schools and taught regular classes in religion there. In February 1918, shortly after they took power, the Communists made their first, limited move against the teaching of religion. They stopped all teaching of religion in all schools, state and otherwise, above the sixth form. However, the teaching of religion



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continued to be permitted in schools, including state schools, in the sixth form and below.

The Communists always move in stages . . . now everywhere we nuns went, people looked at us askance. Summer came and I had a holiday coming, since the summer before I had spent going around to farms collecting eggs for the convent, just as I used to watch the nuns do when I was a little girl and thought there was a special nuns' language. For my holiday I went for two months to our convent farm in a valley near Bratislava, where the Carpathian Mountains start.

The thirty sisters at the farm talked of little else but what the Communists might do, and I, wondering if they would strike soon at all the schools, would think, "Everything I've done will be thrown away." I put on my white veil and looked after the geese, as I had done as a child, taking them out on a hillside pasture to graze. Also I grazed two goats named "Zuzanna" and "Judita". They were strong nanny goats and would drag me along by their chains until finally I got to the hillside and tied the chain to a large oak tree. I would sit back against the oak and watch the geese and my two nanny goats and read a book on the lives of the saints. But I could not get away from it. "The Communists are here, and things will be different now . . ." This thought would suddenly thrust itself up through the lives of the saints. And from my book I would look up to the mountains. I would take off my shoes and kneel and pray, using the oak as an altar. I pray God to strengthen us, now that our hour of trial was upon us.

It was the summer of change in me. One thing I remember, my sister friend and I who used to be called the

## *The Communists Take Over*

‘Laughing Sisters’ because we were always having fun—after that summer I never remember anyone calling us that.

In September 1918, when I went back to Bratislava, it was to find that the convent schools were being permitted to remain open with sisters as teachers. I thanked God. Also sisters and priests continued to teach religion in the state schools in the sixth form and below.

So a year passed in which nothing much was done to the state schools. A watchful year on both sides. Then a new year came, and by now the Communists were ready to take on the state schools, too.

First, in September 1919, nuns and priests were forbidden to teach religion at all in state schools, even below the sixth form. That put a finish to all teaching of religion in state schools.

Now the only schools left where religion was taught were the Catholic schools in the sixth form and below. Now the Communists proceeded, though very cautiously, against these.

Meantime, the Communists were already at an end of caution in another direction—the convents. The everlasting Communist slogan, repeated everywhere, emblazoned everywhere in signs, sung everywhere in songs, and finally even ordered as a method of greeting, was the phrase “Praci cest—Honour to Work”. Work was the supreme thing above all things, they kept repeating, as if they had invented it. They looked around for people who were not working. And lo! the convents—there, they said, were very nests of un-work. And so the Communists moved against the convents.

This time the Communists moved like the blow of a mighty hammer.

## *The Eviction of the Nuns*

At eight o'clock on a morning in October 1949, a detachment of fifty police, about half of them uniformed police and about half secret police in plain clothes, appeared at our convent with no warning. They said they would have to search the convent. About forty of the sisters were shut into the dining-room with a policeman to watch them. Policemen were assigned to stay with the other sisters who had work to do, to make sure that they didn't hide anything. No sister was left alone. I continued teaching my kindergarten class while a policeman stood at the door. Other policemen kept the convent surrounded.

The rest of the policemen then proceeded to tear the convent apart.

They went through every room, even those convent rooms closed to men. They searched all the nuns' quarters, went through all the cupboards, the night tables, and the beds, turning over the mattresses. They searched even the sanctuary in the chapel. You could hear their heavy tread as they overran the convent.

The policeman who searched my room turned up a fine cine-camera which a priest had left with me when he had to go to jail.

"What's this?"

"That's a cine-camera."

"What's it for?"

"It's for the kindergarten."

"There's no reason whatsoever to have a cine-camera in a kindergarten, I'll have to take that with me."

And he went off with my fine cine-camera.

From the nuns' quarters the policemen turned up more serious evidence. Among this evidence was an anti-Com-

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munist book written before the Communists seized power. We later believed that the book was put there by the police themselves. In any case, the officer in charge brought it to the mother superior.

"My men found this anti-Government book in one of your nuns' beds".

"If he did, I'm very surprised."

"The whole convent is against the Government."

Then the officer produced a stack of five or six religious books, such as prayer books, novenas, and the lives of the saints.

"My men also found these."

"Naturally. This is a convent."

The officer instructed his assistant to list the anti-Communist book and the religious books on a sheet of paper. He made him write out below that these books had been found in this convent. Then the officer got Mother Superior to sign this piece of paper.

Then the police, who had been there four hours, left, and we spent the rest of the day straightening up after them.

Three days later at our noon meal while the rest of us ate silently, one of the sisters read from a spiritual reading book, as was our mealtime custom. That day it was the story of Tobias. The sister read:

"One day Tobias had to journey to a strange city and he did not know the way. Then he found a young man to show him the way. And the young man went with Tobias all the way to the strange city, then brought him back to his own people. When Tobias and his father started to pay him the young man said to them, 'I am the angel Raphael, one of the seven who stand before the Lord.' Then Tobias and his

### *The Eviction of the Nuns*

father fell upon their faces, and when they arose they saw him no more. Then they confessed the great and wonderful works of God, and how the angel of the Lord had appeared unto them."

When we had finished our meal, Mother Superior rang her bell which meant we were to get up and go into the chapel and pray. But this time Mother Superior said, "Sit down, sisters. I have something to say to you."

We sat down again and Mother Superior said, "I have received a letter this morning from the Government."

She waited a moment. "I will read you the letter," she said then. And she read: "The convent home which belongs to the congregation of the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour, situated at 6 Jakubovo Square and 34-36 Grosslingova Street, is not properly occupied since it contains underground movements against the Government. Furthermore, the activity which is being conducted in it at the present time is not necessary. For these reasons the Government hereby takes over this convent in order to put it to a better and more efficient use. The convent school and old-age home are allowed to stay. Otherwise everything is to be removed. However, the convent is permitted to take all of its religious belongings wherever it decides to go. You are allowed three days to carry out this order."

It was as if the world had come to an end. There was not a sound. We all looked at Mother Superior, and we could see her face wet with tears. Then all around me I could hear the crying of the sisters. The older sisters were shaking and weeping, for this had long been their home, and here they had expected to finish their lives.

"This means we have to go," Mother Superior was saying

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rather brusquely. "We can't do a thing about it. We'd only go to jail. We have to accept it just as though it were from the hands of God, that even though we can't understand it, He in His wisdom is allowing the Communists to do this to us."

The younger of us were trying to pull ourselves together, but the sounds of the old sisters were still heard, though more softly now, through the hall. Then Mother Superior, as though for them, spoke softly but fervently.

"Don't lose faith," she said. "We're not the first ones to have to go through this. Many times before this has happened—and religion has survived. God will help us. He will go with us all the way, as He went with Tobias."

She paused, and then she spoke briskly again. "Now everybody go and get packed."

From the dining-room we went into the chapel, as we always did after eating. We knelt and said our regular prayers aloud, thanking God for His everyday gifts. Then, instead of getting up as we usually did, we stayed, though no one told us to, and each prayed silently her own prayer.

"Jesus," I prayed, "why is it so hard so suddenly? It comes so suddenly."

It was time for my class, so I went back to the kindergarten.

"What's wrong, *Sestricka* (Sister)?" the children asked.

I did not know I was crying.

"The sisters have to leave the convent," I said.

The children all gathered around me very solemn-faced.

"Why, *Sestricka*?" one little boy asked. "Why do the sisters have to leave?"

"The Government says so," I said.

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Several of the little voices spoke up. "Let's all go . . . we'll all go with the sisters . . ."

A little girl started pulling at my habit. I looked down, and her eyes were very wide and worried.

"Sestricka," she said, "are you going, too?"

"No," I said.

"We wouldn't let you go anyhow," she said in a tiny voice, and holding on to me.

For the rest of the afternoon I had them do drawings. I was too sad to sing or tell stories.

It was a terrible three days, those next three. The Government letter did not tell us where to go. After all, when you serve an eviction notice, it is not up to you to find the people another place. Mother Superior made arrangements to take the sisters to a hospital of our order seventy-five miles away, at Trencin. All seventy sisters would go except for five who were to stay on—four sisters to take care of the twenty-four old people in the old-age home, and me to teach the kindergarten. Of the six convent buildings, all except the kindergarten and the old-age home were to be taken over, including the nuns' living quarters, which meant that we five sisters who were staying had to move into the old-age home. Since there were only three vacant beds, we had to take turns, with two of us sleeping on the floor for five months until a couple of the old ladies moved out. The rest of the sisters packed their belongings for their new home. Everyone was too busy even for us to eat together, and each grabbed what she could and continued packing.

\* The religious statues and the religious paintings were packed up, along with clothes, dishes, and some furniture.

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The chapel was stripped. All the religious objects came down from the chapel. The largest painting, behind the altar, an oil painting of Jesus appearing to Saint Marguerite when she was praying; the two statues on either side of this painting, one of Saint Joseph holding the infant Jesus, the other of the Blessed Virgin. The painting of Saint Augustine. Down they came, all of them. Down came the fourteen paintings depicting the Way of the Cross. Down came the huge oak cross on the ceiling with the words across it "*Per Crucem ad Lucem*" ("Through the Cross to the Light") and the cross painted in such a way that light appeared to be shining from it. The small organ was taken out. And finally, the huge marble altar ten feet long, which had been imported from Italy, was taken out.

Those three days it was as if Death itself walked through that convent, and the sound of tears lay upon the corridors.

On the last day the priest celebrated a final Mass in the chapel. It was the first time we had been all together since Mother Superior read the letter. The chapel looked like no chapel whose walls had ever echoed to the beautiful words of the Mass. Great spots of broken plaster, like bleeding sores, looked down upon the priest from where had looked Saint Augustine and Saint Marguerite and Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin and Jesus Christ. No sweet music sounded forth, for where the music had come from stood another scab of ripped flooring, the resting place of the organ. No altar stood with its tabernacle bearing the Blessed Sacrament—only more gutted floor and wall, and a small kitchen table draped with a white tablecloth.

All the seventy nuns gathered a last time in that chapel,



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and the priest stood before us. There was no organ, but we sang a song we frequently had sung in that chapel:

Here in the Holiest Sacrament  
Is enthroned the hidden Jesus King.  
He came down from the heights of heaven  
So He would be staying amongst us.

Before You we are kneeling down in the dust,  
With our kindness we are begging You  
To give us Your kindness,  
Oh, Jesus, King of our Hearts!

The priest said the Mass. Then he turned towards the nuns to read from the Bible and to preach.

The priest's mouth moved, but no words came from him. The only sounds in that chapel were the sounds of tears falling on the nuns' starched collars, on the priest's vestments.

"Sisters . . ." the priest finally said. He was very pale. "For the last time we are present at a Mass in this chapel . . ."

And he waited again, without voice. Then he went on.

"Sisters . . ." he said, his voice weak and broken, "I can see the tears in your eyes, as I feel them in my own. It is a very beautiful thing when a new chapel is blessed and given to God. For then that chapel becomes a place where the people will honour God. where they may come and pray to Him, and where He will be able to receive them as children at His own table and to bless them. But what can be said of a time when we have to do the opposite? When, instead of blessing a new chapel, we have to tear the chapel down . . ."

And now the priest's voice was no longer weak, but rose

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in terrible anger, until it became like the voice of one upon the mountain. "What can be said when we have to tear down the paintings of God"—and he pointed to the bleeding sores upon the walls. "What can be said when we have to break down the altar of God"—and he pointed to the gaping hole where the altar had been, and his voice rose yet again in a righteous wrath. "What can be said when we have to close the door in front of the people and give the chapel to those who will make of that holy place a shame, a circus . . ."

And the priest stood there, tears pouring down his cheeks.

"But don't lose faith in God," he said, and now his voice was weak again, trembling. "Build your own altar in your heart, an altar which no human hands can tear down as they have torn these paintings down, which nobody can destroy as this altar has been destroyed. Keep that altar in your hearts, and as I stand here to-day, one day God will raise up again His own altar—in this very place!" And he made the sign of the cross. "For the last time now, may God bless you in this place . . ."

Taking the Blessed Sacrament, the priest started up the aisle. And the seventy nuns, carrying candles, followed him. We followed him out of the chapel, out of the convent, and to a nearby church, where the priest left the Blessed Sacrament to show that it, too, had been evicted by the Communists.

After this last Mass the nuns climbed into lorries which were also carrying the religious objects from the convent. The sisters and Mother Superior said good-bye to me and the four sisters who were staying to care for the old people.

"Sisters," Mother Superior said, "in a way it will be harder

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on you than on any of us. At least we will be together. You will be amongst them. Have faith! God bless you. God give you strength!"

Mother Superior was a strong woman but she cried.

Thus the Communists, to give "Honour to Work", dealt with the convents. It was to Trenchin that my fellow sisters went that terrible day—Trenchin, which was eventually turned into a concentration camp for nuns, with hundreds of them sent there from all orders. A concentration camp, and a sort of replacement centre from whence nuns were shipped to work in factories. Those from our convent were sent, in time, to eight different places scattered all over Czechoslovakia—most of ours were sent, in 1902, to work in a rope factory in Bohemia. They are there to-day. They live in huts in government camps and wear working smocks over their religious habits, for they have refused to take these off as the Government asked. They have numbers sewn on the smocks, and a sister is not a sister, but "144". And they make ropes. There is a bitter joke amongst them: "We're making ropes to be hanged by."

The Communists move in stages, bitter stages. First, in 1905, the Communists started putting nuns to work in the fields. Then, in 1911 and 1912, they started putting them in the factories, mostly in textile mills where they make Army and workers' uniforms. It is a cowardly way to do it. If the Communists had courage, they would simply say, "There shall be no more nuns," and execute all nuns. But they are scared to say, "There shall be no more nuns." So they forbid any young girls to join convents, and meantime they put the nuns still alive into fields and factories and wait for them to die off.

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The next day, after Mother Superior had left with the sisters for Trencin, a detachment of fifteen religious and political prisoners under guard arrived at our convent to remake it, including making offices of where the nun's bedrooms had been, partitioning the big nuns' dining-room into still more offices, and converting the chapel into a meeting hall for a Communist women's organization called the "Zivelia". This was the "better and more efficient use" to which the convent was to be put.

The workers who came to transform the convent were my first contact with this kind of prisoner, a good many of which kind I was to see later and some of whom to help to flee the Communists and cross the border. I knew as an idea that human beings could be imprisoned for religious activity, but I had never actually seen any. It was a shock to me to see men wearing heavy grey prison uniforms and being guarded with guns, like wild animals, because of their religion.

The prisoners were the gentlest of men. One of the guards was friendly, too, and when this one was on duty I managed to slip food to the prisoners, leaving the food under a veranda of their quarters at the convent. My little children, noticing this, asked if they could slip something, too. I suppose even their little eyes could see that the men being guarded with guns were gentle creatures. So the children brought small packages of salami and bread to the school in paper bags and I passed these packages, too, on to the prisoners.

Amongst the prisoners, I soon discovered, was a young priest. I was in the garden one day when he came to get a drink of water from the well, and I gave him one. He was

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only twenty-five years old. I asked him what he had been imprisoned for. He shrugged, and a thin smile traced across his lips. "For being a priest," he said. His job here was to be a bricklayer's mate, and he heaved bricks and mortar. What a cruel thing, I thought, to force a priest to work changing a convent into offices for a Communist organization.

In a way I was glad the prisoners were there. I felt among friends as long as they were near. But one day they finished transforming the convent and left. I said good-bye to them, including the young priest, who asked me to get some rosaries and prayer books—and a breviary for himself and some reading glasses, for he had lost his—and bring them to him in prison, and he would give them to his fellow prisoners. "They are good boys," he said simply. I got fifteen rosaries and fifteen prayer books from a priest I knew, and also the breviary and glasses and some socks and underwear for the young priest, and took them to him in prison. This was the beginning of my helping people who had got into trouble with the new Government. One I helped, who later was to help me, was a girl named Veronicka, to whom I took some blankets and food in jail.

With my fellow sisters gone, and now with even the prisoners gone, I felt very lonesome, like an orphan. All around my kindergarten the Communists swarmed through the convent during the day, making great efficient noises, tossing orders around, and incessantly singing the Communist "Work Anthem", or "Honour to Work" song:

•Sound the song beautiful and loud,  
Be Honour to Work! Honour to Work!  
Work, the only thing the people have

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To take comfort in,  
Because everything the human being has  
Comes only from work.  
Be Honour to Work!  
Be Honour to Work!

The Zivena group of Communist women worked with the women and children. In order that all Slovakian women could work under the Communist "Honour to Work" programme, Zivena sent out its members to take care of children in Government "mangers" while the mothers worked. If there was a big Communist celebration, it did the same thing to make it possible for the mothers to attend, and provided transportation for them, too. Then the Zivena women worked directly with children, taking them to Communist camps for vacations and distributing Communist-type toys to the children. They used to come into my kindergarten and ask me if I would like some toys for the kindergarten. They would do this, acting very kindly in front of the children to show the children that they, the Zivena, would give the children anything they wanted. When they asked me, I would reply, "Nothing, thank you."

Their typewriters and adding machines sounded through the convent. The former air of quietness was destroyed, and where nuns used to walk in the garden now walked women in blue smocks, Zivena women—very disciplined women with a brisk, efficient air. I tried to avoid them as much as possible, but it was difficult. In a far corner of the garden was a quiet place, a bench under a walnut tree, where formerly I used to go to pray and think, but now even this place was overrun with them.

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Then at night they would hold large meetings in what had been our chapel and was now a meeting hall, and many people would come, tramping through the convent. From the chapel where songs to the Jesus King had once been lifted now sometimes at night I could hear their voices raised in bellowing adoration of a new deity:

Russia is our mother,  
Russia is that sweet land  
Which is raising in herself a great son,  
The glorious and never-dying Stalin.

He is the sun that warms the whole world.  
He is the ray-bright star which shows us the light ahead.  
For that sing to him every Comrade!  
From one pole of the earth to the other!

One day, not long after the prisoners had finished their rebuilding and gone, I had a longing to go into the chapel. I thought it would give me strength just to go in there, for even though the religious objects were all gone it was twenty-one years now that I had prayed daily in that chapel, and it was where I had taken all my promises to be a nun.

So one night after the Communists had held a meeting in the chapel and had left, I got the cleaning woman to let me in. I turned on the light and stood at the entrance to the chapel. I looked, and what I saw made great waves of shock roll through me.

Behind the altar where had been the large painting of Saint Marguerite praying to Jesus was now an equally large picture of Stalin, and by it pictures of Lenin and Gottwald, the Communist President of Czechoslovakia. Where had

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been the two statues, on either side of it, of Saint Joseph holding the infant Jesus and of the Blessed Virgin, were now two large Communist flags. Where had been the fourteen paintings of the Way of the Cross, were now dozens of signs such as "Honour to Work" and "Good Luck to the Five Year Plan". Where had been the great altar were now chairs and tables. The chapel was filled with cigarette smoke, and the floor littered with cigarette ends.

I stumbled forward, down the aisle to where the altar had been, to where I had once prostrated myself to be a nun. There among the cigarette ends I fell down, prostrating myself again and crying blindly, sobbing, shaking, and my voice cried out:

"God, how could you allow this?"

## 7

### THE BATTLE FOR THE CHILDREN

MY kindergarten and I, we were like a small fortress surrounded by Communists, a tiny band of holdouts. It was like a state of siege. The atmosphere, with the incessant Zivena women all around us, was not the best for teaching small children. But I kept on teaching as I had done for so many years, telling my stories and teaching my games to the children and drawing flowers with them and cutting the flowers out and pasting on paper.



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Then the Communists began to penetrate our little fortress.

Again they moved cautiously. It is a genius of the Communists that they know when to move fast and when to proceed cautiously. To interrupt the deep-rooted custom of nuns teaching little children was one of those things on which to proceed cautiously. And all the time they had an even more evil goal, which we were to learn later. This was to induce the nuns themselves to join them and be *their* teachers. They actually had that idea. Another genius of the Communists is to underestimate the spirit of resistance within people who believe strongly in something different from their own doctrine. It is extremely difficult for them to believe that there can be a will as fierce and undying as they consider their own to be.

That school year of 1909-10 was a strange battle of nerves, with the Communists trying to chunk away at the nuns' teaching of religion in their own form schools, and the embattled sisters resisting. It was a year, too, of the Communists trying with every weapon, beginning with gentle persuasion, to induce the sisters to change—by way of taking a "political course" which they tried repeatedly to get us to take—into a different species of teacher.

The first step, starting in the autumn of 1914, was to direct all form-school teachers to attend meetings which were held every two weeks in one of the state schools. The slow process had started. These meetings were entitled "Teachers' Instructional Courses", and were conducted by a Communist "supervisor" from the Government Department of Education. At first they consisted mainly of lectures. One lecture, for example, would deal with this

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theme: "You should raise the children from the beginning to make them realize they have a good government." We nuns in the classes would sit and wait and watch. No one as yet was making any move towards us, and so we attended and remained watchful, waiting for the move, the orders, the insistence, the force that we knew must come after the words were at an end.

Soon the meetings passed from the theory stage to the stage of gradual insistence. Soon each time, at each of these three-hour-long meetings, we were told something new to do with the children.

November was Russia friendship month. At the first meeting that month we were given short Russian and other Communist songs to teach the children. At the second meeting we were told to explain to the children who Joseph Stalin was—who he was, where he was living, how he helped the people, how good he was. This instruction to the teachers was quite solemn, as if we were about to undertake to describe to the children a new planet.

In December, at the first meeting, we were told, "Saint Nicholas is forbidden, and any practice of Christmas is forbidden in the schools. Propaganda such as telling the children that Jesus is coming to see them at Christmas, when it's not true, shall not be said any more." In December, too, at the other two-weeks' meeting, we were told to keep the children in at lunch and not to send them home to their parents. The idea was, the less they saw of their parents, the less they would learn from them. "That way," said the supervisor, "the children will not learn the old ways, but will get to be progressive citizens for the Communist Government when they grow up." Repeatedly the supervisor emphasized

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the thing of getting the children when they were young and starting to indoctrinate them.

In January the emphasis was on teaching the children the all-importance of work. At the first meeting that month we were told to teach the children a new way of greeting each other. For centuries back the greeting among Slovak people when they met had been "*Pochvaleny bud Jezis Kristus* (Praised be Jesus Christ)," at which the other answers, "*Na veky amen* (Forever amen)."

Now the Communist supervisor at the meetings told us that we must tell the children to stop greeting each other this way. The new way, when children or anybody else saw each other, was for one to say, "*Praci cest* (Honour to work)," and the other to reply, "*Cest* (Honour)." We were told to indoctrinate the children in this strange new method of salutation.

In January, at the second meeting, we were told that there would be new toys for the children. No longer were there to be merely dolls and knights and toy dogs. We were told that the inspector for our class would presently bring us a new batch of toys. Little tractors, steam shovels and plain shovels and the like. The idea again was that everything was now "Honour to Work". These toys were also to be the foundation for new games to replace the old, frivolous games. Ring-a-ring-o'-roses and hopscotch were done with. Instead of ring-a-ring-o'-roses, the little children four, five, and six years old were supposed to dig holes in the sand with the steam shovels and the plain shovels to prove how much work they could do. Instead of hopscotch, they were supposed to play a new game called "work brigade", which consisted of carrying sticks on their little

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shoulders to represent shovels and marching around the yard. This was to be a preparation for the time at about seven years old when they would go into real Communist "work brigades". It was such nonsense that one would have thought the supervisor was bringing off a great joke, had he not delivered it in the manner of a field marshal outlining a battle order.

In February, at the first meeting, we were told for the first time verbally to stop all teaching of religion. Actually the official ruling on this had come out in the autumn of 1948, but this ruling above all took constant following up to enforce. "Don't," said the Communist supervisor now, "turn the children's heads with something that never existed."

In February, at the second meeting, we were told, "Take all religious pictures and objects down from your classroom." And an order came through: "No emblems of any kind shall be displayed in any schoolroom except Government emblems."

As these orders came out from the endless fount of the meetings every two weeks, they were just so many words until they were backed up. In my school that was the job of the *pany referentka*—"lady inspector".

She wore blue overalls. She had dark brown, curly hair all fluffed out, a sharp nose, and an air of the most precise efficiency. She was about thirty-five. She would walk into the classroom without warning and sit there listening to me teaching the children, making notes in a notebook which she always carried. She would look all around like a mechanic inspecting a car. Mother Superior would never have thought of coming in without warning like that and watching me teach, but the Communists have their own

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way of doing things. She would come about twice a week and ask the children all sorts of questions, what songs they were singing, what stories they were told, did they like school, did they like the sister (which was what she called me in front of the children since that was the way they knew me, though when we were by ourselves she called me *sudruska ucitelka*, "comrade teacher"). The children would stand there very politely and answer her, but always looking at me as they answered, which infuriated her. "Yes, we do," they said when the comrade woman asked them about me, "we like her very much."

Also the comrade woman kept her shoes on in my classroom.

Between the Communist woman inspector and myself there quickly began a personal battle of nerves. On my part it was an attempt to defend our way of teaching at every step. On hers, it was an attempt to change it here and change it there and change it whichever way she could.

The next day after each of the meetings she would come trotting to me with a copy of the newest order we had received the day before and, where necessary, the tools with which to fulfill it. When the order on teaching the children Russian and other Communist songs was given, she appeared with a sheaf of songs. When the order came on educating the children about Joseph Stalin, she brought me a great batch of material on the well-known Russian. When the order on the new toys came out, she turned up with a batch of little tractors, steam shovels, and plain shovels. Carrying out the order of not teaching religion any more, she took away our books such as *Jezisko V Prirode* (*Jesus in Nature*), which contained such bad things as:

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Come children to Jesus,  
He will make fairy tales for you,  
He is holding wide His arms,  
Come to Him quietly.

Come from towns and cities,  
By Him there is always plenty of room,  
Sit down here in the grass  
Where Jesus is talking to you.

So, with the comrade woman sitting there, I taught the children the same "Honour to Work" song I heard bawled by the Communist women in the convent. I told them a little story about Stalin. I told them about the five year plan. I taught them to greet each other, not by saying, "Praised be Jesus Christ", and answering, "Forever amen", but by saying, "Honour to work", and answering, "Honour".

Then when the comrade woman left, satisfied, I told them about Jesus in the manger. I told them how God had created man by breathing into a piece of mud. I told them how God was everywhere and could see even into dark cellars.

Wherever there were ruses, I sought them out. We weren't supposed to celebrate Saint Nicholas Day, 6 December, so instead of making slippers and filling them with sweets for the children to carry home, I put the sweets in plain brown bags so that no one would see it. The processions of the children across the city on the holy days, when they used to strew flowers on the streets, were forbidden now. And anywhere you took the children on an outing, you had to get a permit from the Government office. So when the time came to take the children on their annual trip to the Shrine of Mary's Portion, I applied for and got

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a Government permit to take them on a "picnic", which I did not specify was to be held at the shrine. When we were forbidden to open and close each class by making the children pray, "Our Father Who art in heaven," I got them to sing a little song before and after class, which went:

Our heavenly Father  
Who takes care of the flowers,  
Be kind and look upon  
Us small children.  
We want to be good for ever  
For the happiness of our parents  
And for your great appreciation.

Which they allowed. The Lord's Prayer was forbidden, but they hadn't yet got as far as making an order forbidding such mild songs as these.

Of all the things in my classroom that angered the woman inspector the religious pictures and emblems which hung on the walls infuriated her the most, for these she had to sit and look at. But there was no order as yet, so all she could do was be angry and scribble furiously in her notebook. However, after the order came in February to take down all religious objects, promptly the next day she turned up in the classroom wearing a look of triumph. I was holding class, and she trotted in and interrupted me in front of the children.

"Here you are," she said happily.

She handed me a copy of the Government order, "No emblems of any kind . . ." Also she handed me a list of the religious pictures and objects in my kindergarten, as if I didn't know.

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The list was extensive. At the front of the room, by the blackboard was a large picture of Jesus with the children and under it Jesus' words from the Bible which I had pasted there, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for of such is the kingdom of God." By this picture hung a large Cross with the crucified Christ.

This picture and the Cross together, being at the front of the room, formed as it were our altar. On the walls, too, were a picture of Saint Joseph and Jesus in the carpenter's shop, and another picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary with Jesus in her arms.

Now all these were supposed to come down. Jesus was supposed to disappear off the stage—and also off the wall.

The woman inspector told me to comply with the Government order and to take the pictures and the Cross down.

"*Dobre*," I said, pressing my lips together, "All right."

And I did nothing.

Each time she came after that she mentioned it to me, each time more threateningly, reminding me of the Government order.

"*Dobre*," I would say.

Finally I had to take down the Virgin Mary and the Saint Joseph. This satisfied her for a few visits. Then she kept mentioning the Cross.

"Take down the Cross, Comrade," she said.

I bit my lip. "*Dobre*."

This went on for many more visits and many more threats. Finally I took the Cross. But I did not take it down. I moved it—from the front wall to the back wall.



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She let it rest there.

That left the picture that to her was the worst of all. The largest, the one in the most important place, the one the children looked at always from where they sat—the picture of Jesus and the children.

Visit after visit the comrade woman spoke to me about this picture.

“Dobre,” I always answered.

Finally one day she burst in while I was conducting class.

“Now I’ve told you many times about that picture,” she said, “I want you to take it down, according to the order.”

“Dobre,” I said.

“Now,” she said.

I didn’t move. “Take it down, Comrade,” she said, and pointed a finger at Jesus and the children gathered around Him in the picture.

I was trembling with anger, both at the order and at the name by which she addressed me. The children in the classroom looked up, frightened. It was an awful thing for them to have to see.

Suddenly the woman inspector turned on me angrily. “My patience is at an end with you,” she said. “Take that picture down!”

She particularly wanted me to do it, and in front of the children, so that they should see a nun take a picture of Jesus down at a Communist’s order. I would have died first.

“Take it down!” she said again. “For the last time I’m telling you, take it down!”

I was extremely angry as this woman stood there in blue overalls giving me such an order.

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"I didn't put it up," I said. "Let who put it up take it down."

"This will only lead to trouble for you," she said. "You're asking for something to happen to you."

"I will not take it down," I said. "Do you understand that? If you want it down, take it down yourself."

She hesitated. It was a fearful thing to do, even for her, to lay hands on a religious picture. It was the same way later in the hospital when the Communists issued an order that all the crosses, which were over each of the children's beds, must come down. The director of the hospital passed the order along. But no one wanted to be the one who actually took the crosses down. The doctors said, "We are doctors, it is not our business to take crosses down." The maids said they were afraid—afraid their hands would be paralyzed if they laid them on the Cross to take it down.

So the Communists said, "The sisters must take them down. The Catholics should take them down—it's their emblem."

And we said, "We would be the last to take them down." Even the Communists, who professed such hardness, were afraid to take down the Cross. So in the hospital they stayed up, for no one would take the crosses down.

Now, as we stood there before the children, the Communist woman inspector in her blue overalls, and me, Sister Cecilia, in my religious habit, it was the same thing. I could feel the fear even in her to touch that picture. But if it was going to come down, I wanted her to do it as she wanted me. Furthermore, I wanted her to do it in front of the children.

"Take it down!" she said once more.

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The children, frightened, were beginning to whimper, for hard anger disturbs children.

"Never," I said. "Never, never' will I take that picture down."

She hesitated . . . then she stepped to the wall, her hands reached up and in one furious movement ripped the picture off.

It was a violent act, and the children, as one, let out a gasping cry. They jumped up from their seats and gathered around the picture.

"Why did she take it down?" they cried. "Sister, why did she take Jesus down?"

The woman Communist was panting as she looked at me, hatred in her eyes. And I, I was shaking with anger as I looked at her. It was a few moments before I could speak.

"Jesus' picture isn't supposed to be on the wall any more," I answered the children, looking not at them, but at the Communist woman.

Then, while the Communist woman inspector stood there, seeming to me to be a seething mass half of hatred, half of terror at the awful act she had committed now that she had committed it. . . . As she stood there, the children lifted the picture up, the picture of Jesus and the children, and started making little sounds of pity.

"Oh, poor Jesus," they said, "poor, poor Jesus. Give Him to us, and we'll take Him home and put Him on our wall."

Then the children turned to the Communist woman inspector, and one spoke very shyly.

"May we have Jesus?"

The woman inspector waited one moment, a wild fury on her face. Then she turned and stamped from the room.

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Our classroom looked very different now. Instead of the religious pictures were other pictures and emblems that the comrade woman brought to fill the spaces. At the front of the room, where had been the large picture of Jesus and the children, were now several things to replace it. In the centre went the Czechoslovak coat of arms with the different emblems of lions, eagles, and a bear for the different parts of Czechoslovakia and a double cross over the three peaks of our Tatra Mountains for Slovakia. Beneath this, right above my desk, went an eighteen-inch red star with a black sickle and hammer through it and below it the Communist slogan, "Honour to Work". On either side of the coat of arms went thirty- by twenty-inch pictures of Stalin and Gottwald.

But to the last, when the comrade woman's back was turned, I taught religion to the children, even beneath the hammer and sickle. I said to myself, "If they're going to put me in jail, let them have a reason for it."

Thus the battle of nerves was fought directly, with bare claws. But a much bigger and more refined battle of nerves, with the highest stakes, was being fought out between the nun teachers and the Communists. What the Communists really wanted was made plain in a conversation I had one day in May 1910 when we nun teachers were called one by one to the office of the chief Government inspector for the form schools.

The amazing thing about this interview was the extreme kindness of the Government inspector. I had the feeling that he was not doing this out of any will of his own but—out of someone else's will. He may have been pretending. Or he may himself have been a good man who had made

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that awful decision that you must work with the Communists, that there is no other way, so you might as well make the best of it. Whichever was the case; he was very kind with me, even gentle. He was a man of about forty-five, who seemed unsure, almost embarrassed as he talked with me.

"Sit down, Sister," and he held a chair for me as I came into his office.

He asked, very gently, how I was getting along in school. I mentioned that the atmosphere for teaching the children was not greatly improved by the comrade woman inspector sitting there scribbling madly in her notebook while I taught them.

The inspector smiled. "I know. She is a vigorous sort, that woman."

"A mild enough word for her," I said.

He laughed. "I don't know why her sort was picked for that kind of job. She was just sent to me," he said apologetically.

He waited a moment, looking down at some folder on his desk.

"Let me see," he said, "how long have you been teaching?"

"Seventeen years," I said.

"A long time," he said. "You are a very experienced teacher. You like to teach?"

"Yes, very much."

He looked at the folder. "I see here you have an excellent record. Every year the top rating from the Government inspector. H-m-m." He glanced through the folder again, then, rather quickly, was looking up at me.

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"Sister," he said, "would you like to keep on teaching the children?"

"Oh yes, I would," I said.

"Well," he said. "H-m-m."

He looked in his folder again, and shuffled it. Then he sat back comfortably in his chair and spread his hands.

"The Government Board of Education," he said, "would like very much for you and the other nuns to continue teaching. I know that we won't find any teachers as good as the sisters are with the children. You are one hundred per cent honest, all of you, and practically all of you are very good teachers and have been teaching very honestly. I know that . . . the Government knows that. We won't be able to replace you. We would like to keep you on."

He waited, looking at me, waited, I suppose, for me to say something. I didn't, and he went on.

"But to keep you on," he said, "it will be necessary for you to do one thing. Just one thing, that is all the Government asks."

He waited, but still I didn't say anything.

"The only thing that will be necessary," he said, "is for you to take a political course—to get a diploma from the Department of Political Education."

I knew what this meant. It meant turning from teaching the children religion to teaching them Communism. What other reason for us to take a "political course"? Now I spoke.

"I can't do that," I said. "My mind and my feelings and my religion . . . they are all against it."

He didn't say anything. He seemed almost embarrassed. Now I went on.

"I have been teaching for seventeen years now," I said,

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"and every year, as you see in that folder, when the Government inspector came, he always gave me first place among the teachers—the number one rating. If I have that sort of rating, why should I go and take another course to try to be something different? Could the course make me any better than number one?"

He waited; and I had the feeling he was studying me, and he seemed almost apologetic.

"Sister," he said, "listen to me. The Government would like very much to keep you as teachers. It doesn't seem too much, does it, for you to do just one thing, take the political course?"

"It seems that it is," I said.

I suppose he saw that I would not change. He continued gently. "Sister, I will give you one more offer. Will you agree that if we have meetings and nothing is said against religion in those meetings, just what has to be done politically, will you attend?"

"Yes," I said, "that we would agree to. But if anything is said against religion in those meetings, we will have to leave the room."

He said he would try at the meeting of the Board of Education to see if this could be arranged.

The interview was over and we shook hands. "It is too bad the Government is giving us such a reward for all that we have done as teachers," I said, and left.

It was a strange interview. The inspector had seemed so gentle. I walked slowly back to the convent, trying to figure it out. One thing, at least, was very clear. The Government wanted to keep us as teachers. They wanted some concessions from us—mainly, a concession to the extent of

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our taking a political course from which we would learn material, that is Communist material, to pass on to the pupils in our instruction. As I neared the convent, it suddenly came over me what the Communists were up to. They wanted to get a large corps of trained teachers, which the nuns were and which indeed they would find hard to replace—you cannot train teachers for an entire nation over night. They wanted us to “come over” and be *their* teachers. They preferred this, actually, to throwing us out. But their evil intent did not stop there. That intent, it suddenly came over me, was something much more, so evil as to bring shudders all through my body: If they could get us to teach their Communist material, then the children would be hearing Communist instruction from people they trusted, that is, their own nun teachers. The monstrousness of this attempt horrified me. But it was an exact definition of what the Communists were after.

And in their cleverness they were trying to attain this end by gentle persuasion. By soft words to us. By telling us it was not much they wanted—only that we would take their “political course”. Only that!

A few days later came another effort to bring us into line, another in the series of pressures. Late in May all the nun teachers and civilian teachers in Catholic schools were called in to a meeting in a cinema which had to be taken over to hold us. Now came another pressure, a little sharper than anything before, but still under the banner of “reason” and calm persuasion.

When we were all gathered in the cinema, a Government official came out and talked to us. His manner was entirely friendly.



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"Now you might as well be reasonable," he said. "Sisters, you might as well face facts. The Government has stepped in, and the schools are equal for everybody. There are to be no more differences. No more this is different and that is different, this is one religion and that, another. We are all one and there is only one Government. We will all be one and one alike. This is the best thing that ever could happen, and the people have been waiting for it a long time. All equal for everybody. Now, isn't that a good thing? Is there anything wrong with that?" he said coaxingly. "We will all be one and one alike."

A teacher, not a nun, but a Catholic lay teacher, stood up in the audience. He was about twenty-four years old. He, too, talked very calmly.

"I may lose my job by what I am about to say," he said. "But I must say it. Now, what this gentleman on the stage says sounds good. On the surface it sounds excellent. 'All equal for everybody.' On the surface there is nothing any of us would argue against in that. But what is beneath it? Beneath it is an effort to take religion away. Beneath it . . . it is a devilish plan! Remember! To-day they take your Catholic schools away from you. Tomorrow they will take your God away from you. This was on my mind and I had to say it."

And he sat down, to considerable applause.

This young man was all too prophetic. Soon, sure enough, they were starting to take God Himself away. And now God has moved out of Slovakia—or, rather, He too has been evicted.

Still, the matter of what would be done about the nuns' refusal to take the "political course" hung in the air. But in

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June, at the end of the school year, everyone had a feeling that this would be our last year. At the school ceremonies closing the year, we had our annual exhibition of little things the children had made. The mothers filled the kindergarten with flowers and came themselves for the ceremonies. I said good-bye to the children. Then suddenly they started coming up to me one by one and giving me little presents and saying little speeches that I knew their mothers had taught them, but which moved me none the less for that.

"*Mila Sestricka*," one would say, "Beloved Sister, thank you sincerely for all you have done for me this past year. You have worried about me and you tried your best to do everything for me, and I will come to see you and God bless you."

And I cried as I gave them little paper pictures of Saint Joseph, and kissed them, each of them. I could not know that it was a good-bye kiss, but in my very bones I felt it.

It is odd about the Communists. When they try to be virtuous it is so unnatural on them. Since their virtue always has calculation in it, it can be easily seen, and they are uncomfortable with it. Their patience with us was this way, their efforts to be gentle and persuasive to get us to come over. Then, if you stand firm, one day they drop their virtues like shackles from around their necks. And they stand snarling and naked, and their angry teeth show. And they are happy and comfortable, for they are in their natural state again.

And so the time came for them to show themselves to us in their natural state, naked and snarling as the beast.

In July all the nun teachers were called once more into a

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meeting in the same cinema in Bratislava. A government education official came out on the stage and stood before the three hundred of us. He was a short, rough-looking man, and bristled with something in him. The instant you looked at him, you knew that the time for gentleness and persuasion was now all at an end and that we stood, now at last, facing each other, enemy to enemy. And he spoke.

"You have hard heads," he said. "I think you break the walls with your heads, they are so hard. We have been very patient with you. The Government is only asking a very little. The Government is only asking for you to take the political course," and now but for a moment his voice turned coaxing, wheedling, "so that as a teacher you will know the meaning of Communist law and Communist Government and how everything is changed, the Government is changed. All we want is that you shall have a diploma from the Department of Political Education."

And now the hardness came back in his voice. "Why must your heads be so hard? Why must you not change one little bit? But because we have so much patience, we are giving you this last chance, but I tell you now, it is the last. If you will only take the political course, you may all stay on as teachers." And now he wheedled. "And, oh, one other thing. The Government does not like to have its teachers wearing religious habits. So it might be wise if you take off those clothes you are wearing and put on the clothes of the Government person. They are very nice clothes, and we will give all of you very nice uniforms."

It was as if one said to a child, "Now be a good little girl and change out of those clothes, Mamicka has some pretty little new clothes for you."

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He stopped and smiled very widely, like a slash across his face.

"Now," he said. "All those willing to do this raise your hands."

Like little children. And he raised his own hand to show how.

I will never forget what followed then. He stood there on the stage, this man, his hand raised. And no other hands came up. Not a hand in the audience, not one hand among the three hundred nuns there. How proud I was! And as he stood there, this little man, with his hand in the air, slowly there came over his face and whole body the realization that his would be the only hand, that though he stand there until the Day of Judgment not one other hand would be raised in that room. From where I sat in the first rows I could see his face colour up, further and further, and swell.

He snapped his hand down.

Then suddenly one sister was on her feet.

"If we were good enough for so many years," she cried out, "why aren't we good now? We're no different!"

Then another sister stood up. "We were good for a long time to teach the children of this country," she cried out. "But if we're no good as we are, we're just plain no good!"

Another stood up. "That our own people should throw us out!"

Another sister stood up and flung the words at the man on the stage. "We'll never be so stupid as to betray our own religion and our own God. Take us to work in the fields! Anything before we'll do the crazy things you're asking for!"

Then other sisters were getting to their feet.

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"Take us to the fields!" rang out a voice, and then the shouts were coming from everywhere.

"Take us to the fields!"

"Take us to the fields!"

"Take us to the fields!"

And now all the sisters were on their feet and shouting it. From all through the hall the shouts rang out in a mighty litany of defiance, sweet and triumphant as the alleluia chorus, crashing down over the stage where stood the little man, all alone, like someone trapped.

Then, in a moment of silence, his face swelling in rage, he shouted out: "You will receive your releases by post! All of you!"

And he turned and fled.

My release came in a few days. It was on Board of Education Stationery. It was all very legal. My name at the top. Then as follows:

(1.) You have failed to fulfill the requirements of the Board of Education.

(2.) You are not qualified to teach unless you are willing to fulfill these requirements.

(3.) Under these conditions you can no longer continue teaching.

(4.) Therefore, with this document you are forbidden to teach in any Czechoslovak school from September 1950 forward.

And so it had come, as it must. "My children," was all I could think, "my little children . . . what will happen to them?"

Immediately I started preparing the inventory of the kindergarten for the civilian teacher who would replace me.

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In the meantime I arranged to go to work in the children's clinic, the state hospital where the sisters of my order were the nurses. I was glad I had studied nursing, for I cannot be away from children. And so now I could look after sick children, which the Communists still permitted us to do.

On 15 August the civilian teacher came, and I gave her the inventory. Then I gave her the keys to the convent and walked away across town on the old stone streets.

## 8

### COMMUNISTS IN ROMAN COLLARS

MY heart bled at leaving the children I had taught so long. But the Communists were saving up their cruelest thing as far as the teaching of children was concerned. It was shortly after the start of the new school year in September 1950, about a month after I had been at the hospital and the first year in seventeen that I would not be teaching, that I found out about the Communists' employment of Kornel.

Kornel was a young man, or boy, of about eighteen, who used to hang around the convent. He was a rather skinny boy of German descent, with a dark complexion and black hair which he combed straight back. He was a mechanic's helper and used to go by the convent, carrying his tools in a wooden box. He was not too bright, and around town was known as "Crazy Kornel". He would do silly things like sud-

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denly going up to people and asking, "May I come to your house for dinner?" If he met someone on the street whom he considered of a better position<sup>1</sup> than himself, he would bow low half-a-dozen times, and if he met someone he considered lower, he would keep his head high in the air, as if he were too proud to notice them. He was pitiful—Crazy Kornel. It was a cruel term, and at the convent we felt sorry for him. We never thought he was a bad boy at all, however foolish, and he would stop as he walked by the convent with his mechanic's box, and we would talk with him. I think he felt that the sisters were about the only real friends he had, the only ones who liked him or would even talk to him without making fun of him while they talked. He had a sort of crazy look in his eyes and with no warning would start giggling while you were talking to him. Most people when he did this would start making fun of him and saying things like, "What are you giggling for? Oh, I forgot, you're Crazy Kornel." But at the convent we pretended never to notice.

One day at the hospital<sup>2</sup> I heard that the Communists had appointed this boy Kornel as "teacher of religion" for the children in a school which included my former kindergarten children. Kornel had answered an advertisement which the Communists, having taken the nuns away, had put in the paper for someone to teach religion. He was teaching his classes, dressed in priest's clothes, including a Roman collar.

I was shocked. The mothers of the children were at first fooled, for few of them knew Kornel. They were happy that even though the nun teachers had been forced out, the Government was still going to provide someone to teach

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their children religion. But the mothers were not fooled long, once their children started coming home and passing on what Kornel was teaching them.

I first found out about his teaching when several of the mothers came to me at the hospital with reports of it. The reports were enough to make me start holding secret religion classes for the children, as some of the mothers wanted me to do.

So at nights, when I was not working at the hospital, we would gather in small groups of about fourteen children. We would meet in different houses with the blinds drawn and move from house to house on different nights to escape suspicion. By day, however, my children went to the Government school, and from them I learned the extent of the evil the Communists were trying to perform on the children through Kornel.

Kornel, the "teacher of religion", would read the children a story out of a book the Communists published. The story dealt with the time Jesus was on this earth. The people, Kornel related to the children, used to ask Jesus and His disciples down to parties at their houses, and Jesus and His disciples would go. One day Peter said to Jesus. "Why should we go to parties all the time, Jesus, where there is only tea and coffee to drink? I want something different."

So Jesus and His disciples went to a party that was really different, where there was card-playing and dancing and drinking. Finally Jesus got tired and went to bed in the same room where some of the people at the party were playing cards at the table. After a while Peter, having drunk a lot, was tired too, and he nudged Jesus and said, "Jesus, move over—can a man stay here and get some sleep?"



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"Certainly," Jesus said. So Jesus moved over against the wall and Peter lay down in the same bed. While he was lying there, a fight broke out at the card table and Peter started laughing. When the players heard Peter laughing, they broke off their game, pulled Peter out of bed, and beat him up.

Then Peter went back to bed and said to Jesus, "Would you mind, Jesus, letting me sleep against the wall so they won't beat me up again?"

So Jesus said, "Of course not," and He and Peter changed places.

As Peter lay against the wall, he started moaning from being beaten up. The card players said, "Why is that fellow next to the wall moaning—we didn't beat *him*. We'll give him something to moan about." So they pulled the one out of bed who was against the wall—they were so drunk they didn't know it was Peter again—and gave him a hard beating. So that Peter got *two* beatings.

It was a story calculated to make religion low and to confuse the children's mind, and especially coming from a man wearing priest's clothing. Under the guise of "teaching" religion, it was all a cruel mocking of religion, and far worse than teaching the children outright to be against religion. Kornel himself was the most innocent of tools in all this. He didn't know what he was doing. He was a parrot for the Communists.

Another story Kornel told the children was of how an angel and the devil got together and started to argue which could run faster. The devil said he could run faster than the angel, and the angel said he could run faster than the devil. So the angel said, "If you think you can run faster, give me

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only six feet start. If you catch me between here and the gates of heaven, all the angels will have to come to hell and help keep your furnaces going. If you don't catch me, you and your comrade devils will have to shine our stars all over the heavens."

So they started to run, and the angel got near the gates of heaven and was still ahead. But just as the angel got into the gate, the devil lunged forward and bit off a piece of one of the angel's feet, which was still sticking out. Then the angel went crying to God that his two feet didn't look alike, for the devil had taken a bite out of one. So God said. "Don't cry, I'll fix it up all right." So God made a hole in the angel's other foot to match and then made all the human people so that they had holes in their feet, too. Before that angels used to have straight feet and so did everybody else. But after that everyone had insteps instead of nice flat feet, and that is the way we all came to have insteps. And the angel was very happy also that he didn't have to go to hell and keep the furnaces going.

Of itself it was in a way an amusing story. But it was calculated, in any children's course in religion, to start a confusion in their little minds. For one thing alone, angels, under religion, are not supposed to have bodies. They have spirits. It was meant to confuse the children's mind and to put them on the wrong path to where, having believed something before, they would soon believe nothing.

Kornel would teach the children many other such stories, as: When Peter's mother came to purgatory, Saint Peter put a rope down and pulled her up to heaven. Also about missionaries having a big party and stuffing themselves until their stomachs stuck out so much they had to jump on each

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other's stomachs to flatten them. These Communist fairy tales.

Of all the cruel things the Communists ever did, this was by far the cruelest. They had deliberately put in as a "teacher of religion" a young man, hardly more than a boy, whom they knew was not too bright—indeed, it was for this reason they had chosen him. This served their purpose in every way. First, by doing it, they could keep up a pretence that they were still teaching religion in the schools. Whenever anyone claimed otherwise, they could point to Kornel and say, "See—we have a teacher of religion." Second, they knew that Kornel could not teach the children any real religion, because he didn't know any. And third, and by far the worst, by using such a boy as the teacher of religion and putting him in the priestly clothing which the children had come to trust, they would poison the children's minds by making a mockery of religion.

Compared with this, there was no other cruelty. Compared with this, my having to take off my nun's clothes later and flee and live like a rat in holes was as nothing.

At night in our secret classes the children would ask me about these tales they had heard in the day at school.

"*Mila Sestricka*, Beloved Sister, is it true about Saint Peter and his mother? Is it true about Jesus and Peter going to the party and Peter getting beaten up?"

"*Nie, mile dietky*," I would say, my heart torn and angry, Saint Joseph forgive my great anger. "No, beloved children. It isn't true."

And I would go on with the religious teaching. I taught the children about the Ten Commandments and what sin is

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and about the Mass and the meaning of the Communion and the confession. Now we had no books, so I wrote out the catechism separately for each child in notebooks. When I had hospital work scheduled at night, my best friend, Sister Margita, a nurse, would do my work for me while I went to the children's homes and taught the classes. When she couldn't do it, I would have the children come to the hospital and teach them there during my supper hour. At the hospital I shared a room with the sister who was in charge of the laundry, and she would let me have the key to the drying room, which was at the back of the hospital away from the rest of it. There we would look ourselves in, the children and myself, and have the religion class, with the clothes drying all around us. I would sit on a wooden step, and they would sit on blankets on the floor in front of me, and we would talk very quietly and at the end pray, "Our Father Who art in heaven." I never saw children obey so perfectly as in this secret class.

But then one day after I had been doing the secret teaching for five months, one of my little girls, named Edita, who was my favourite with her dark curls, betrayed me in all innocence.

I taught the children two things: One, do not tell anyone I am teaching you religion. And two, never lie. But the two did not agree. One day in the Government school, Kornel asked Edita if she was going to Communion.

"Yes," the sweet little one spoke up, "but not with you." For Kornel, for a while, was even taking the children to Communion. "I'm going to Communion with Sister."

"Sister?" Kornel burst out angrily. "What do you have to do with Sister?"

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"Sister," little Edita said, "she is preparing us for Communion."

So Kornel sent word to me: "Don't meddle in my work. It's my work and not yours any more. If you meddle in my work after this, I'm going to report you to the Government."

And it was signed, "Kornel—the official teacher of religion."

So I had to stop the teaching at night, and even so, a priest had to speak to Kornel and talk him out of having something done to me.

Edita was all broken up and crying. "Sestricka," she sobbed, "I couldn't lie."

The other children jumped on her for telling. But I told them, "No, Edita did right. It is better not to lie. Don't cry, Edita. You did right."

But after that I was working in the hospital only.

Poor Kornel. The mothers used to tell how he would come to them telling them how much work and worry he now had, how much responsibility, teaching all those classes. "Everything depends on me," he'd say importantly. Then, pitifully, even while already wearing his reverse collar, he'd ask them for money to get him an education as a priest. They'd tell how on Stalin's birthday or Lenin's a Government representative would come to Kornel's religion classes and read to the children about Stalin's life or Lenin's, and Kornel, wearing his priest's Roman collar, would sit in the front row nodding his head and grinning and clapping like a monkey. Poor Kornel.

Kornel, I later learned, taught "religion" until the summer of 1913, when he, too, was thrown out. In September

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1953, the Communists put through an order that thereafter there would be no religious teaching—even Kornel's kind—in the schools, and that religion could be taught to children only in churches. The Communists had need no longer even of such a pretence as Kornel—his usefulness, too, was at an end. May God forgive Kornel—he was only a tool, and at that, a tool who didn't know what he was doing. But I have often wondered what he must have felt when they threw *him* out. I wonder where he is to-day. I have often thought that probably he is back carrying his mechanic's box past the convent and wishing the sisters were there to talk to him again, so that he would have somebody to talk to who would not make fun of him.

Thus the Communists had their way with the teaching of religion. It had all been so planned out. Looking back, I know that none of us, hardly anyone in Slovakia, really believed the Communists would do what they did do to religion. I remember on one occasion shortly after the Communists came to power that Father Matej showed me a document which he said was a copy of the Government programme for schools which he had been able to get his hands on. The document was entitled, "How We Have to Go Forward." It told how it was necessary to re-educate the nuns and priests, how it was necessary to give them civilian instruction so that they would obey the Government, how any of them who didn't obey would have to be taken away and punished so that the rest would be in fear and would obey. I remember then how I thought the document was a fraud, that even the Communists could not possibly be planning to do those things to religion as rooted as religion was in Slovakia.

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No one really believed they would. We were all so blind. The greatest single fact in people's attitude toward Communists is that they never believe, until they have seen for themselves, that they really are what they are. I, a Catholic and a nun, I didn't believe it. Their mouths are so fruitful with good words and promises—and the "How We Have to Go Forward" documents they never show you. It is perhaps a proof of man's goodness that he finds it almost impossible to believe that all the good words mask an evil so planned. Thus the Communists bait their trap with man's goodness itself.

And even when they come into the open, the Communists, how clever they are! Looking back, it is fearful to see how clever they were in going about their programme. How clever their step-by-step orders! First, religious teaching was forbidden in the higher grades. Then the priests and nuns were forbidden to teach religion in state schools at all. Then they were forbidden to teach religion in any schools, including their own Catholic schools, so that even in kindergarten the children got no religious teaching, for the Communists then said, "In kindergarten there's no reason whatsoever why religion should be mentioned. When the children grow up, they can choose any kind of religion they want." They can choose—after they have been raised without God and in the Communist "Honour to Work" programmes. They can choose—when they don't know anything about any God to choose. In the meantime, as they took religion out of the schools, the Communists busily put the priests who resisted in jail, the nuns in the fields and factories. Having done this, the Communists—to whom seeming contradiction itself is but one more tool—had the

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front to say. "We don't care if anyone teaches religion. We've got nothing against it." And to prove it, they could even put their advertisements in the newspapers asking for someone to teach religion. Very safe sayings, and very safe advertisements, with no one left to teach it. How clever—how evil!

In the hospital, to which I devoted full time now that my secret classes were at an end, I missed teaching children. I had done it so long, and it was my life. For a while I had had at least the secret classes, but then even that was gone. In one way, though, it was almost happier for me at the hospital, for at least I was among sisters again—seventy-four of them—and not as my kindergarten class and I had been, an isolated island in a sea of Communist women. The hospital had sweet memories for me, too, for it was where I had decided to be a nun that wondrous day when the mother superior, this one long since gone, had come down to the reception room and been so friendly, and all the sisters had come in, laughing and happy and not stiff and solemn at all. But most of all, in the hospital I was with children, even if I was not teaching—though even so, I sneaked a fair amount of teaching in while caring for them.

I changed from my black habit to the same nun's white nursing habit—but I was still, I would thank God, wearing a habit. I shared a plain small room that looked out over the street with the sister who was in charge of the laundry, though it seemed I saw little of this room. I had nine sick children, up to fifteen years old, to care for in everything. Feeding them and washing them and cleaning their wounds and giving them blood plasma. They were in the hospital for appendectomies and rupture operations and for drinking



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lye, and there was one tubercular child. One of my children, aged seven, died of leukemia. I worked long hours, and twenty-four weren't enough to get the work done. I would sleep four or five hours at the most at night. But I was glad to be busy and happy to be with children.

All around us were the evidences of increasing Communist presence in the lives of the people. One of the chief of these for the children was the "work brigades", which now took on the stature almost of a religion itself. For the Communist idea was that everyone should work, and unceasingly they hammered on this idea. It is mine, too, but we have different ways of going about it.

Starting from the second form, seven years old, the children were formed into the work brigades, conducted by their school teachers. While a lorry followed them down the street, the children went from door to door collecting pieces of junk, old bottles and rags to take to the Government collection centre. The little children wore blue overalls, just like the grownups were starting to wear under the Communists. These blue overalls were becoming the universal uniform, and the saying was that before long, no other clothes would be worn in all Slovakia, except blue overalls, so that it would be like one huge penitentiary. As the children got a little older—eight, nine, and ten—they graduated from collecting junk and old bottles to going out to the fields, where their work brigades would be marched to pick grapes, poppy seeds and peas. There was some grumbling among the farmers on whom these free labour battalions were forced that the children tramped down more than they helped, but to the Communists the important thing was that while it might be hard on the

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farmers, the children were being indoctrinated in their divine "Honour to Work" creed. The work brigades served another purpose. They always operated on Sundays, which meant the churches were emptied of children.

One Sunday I was taking a walk down the street. The nuns who had not been taken to concentration camps did not go out much these days, but from my days on the farm as a child I have always been used to fresh air and exercise, and that Sunday I felt that, Communists or not, I would have to have a little fresh air. Suddenly I saw strung out along the street something I recognized as a children's work brigade. The children were jogging up to the front doors of houses, from where they would presently return carrying bottles, rags, or junk and run up and deposit in the lorry which was moving slowly down the street. The children were about seven. They were all wearing blue overalls.

As I came closer, I recognized some of the children whom not long ago I had taught in kindergarten. I was furious, and I stopped one of my former little girls as she came skipping out of a house carrying an old piece of metal and singing the song "Honour to Work". She was wearing her little blue overalls and a tiny blue cap to match, and her face was covered with smut.

"Look how dirty you are!" I said. "Why don't you dress up and go to church?"

"Oh, then we would lose," she said in her little voice. "Our school is having a race with the other schools to see who gets the most, and if we work hard, we get first prize."

I walked away, broken in my heart. Behind me I could hear her tiny voice taking up the song again, "Honour to Work".

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Once when I was upstairs working at the hospital, a sister said there was a little boy downstairs to see me. I went down, and it was one of my former kindergarten children, now about seven. He was holding a pretty little doll which he held out for me.

"Sister," he said, "this is for you."

I was pleased and touched.

"I took this on the work brigade," the boy said.

"Thank you, but I don't believe I want it," I said, "if it was stolen."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Sister," the boy said. "All the children take things."

He had "taken" it while on his rounds picking up junk, and while the woman's back was turned at one house.

"It's all right, Sister," he said. "It's allowed. The other children take lots of things, and they never say anything." And he added, "I saw this and I thought of you."

I suppose the Communist teaching that "Everything belongs to everybody, and you're not stealing it, you're just taking it because it's everybody's"—that this was getting across even to the children.

There were work brigades for grown-ups, too. Even at the hospital the director had to institute them, on Government orders. Groups of doctors' wives had to come down to the hospital and clean floors and windows and toilets. Even the doctors themselves had to put on blue overalls and go around to houses and collect junk and old mattresses. The idea here was the same, that everyone had to DO something for the Government, and also that everyone was on the same level. If a man was performing surgical operations

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all day, that wasn't *work*. Work meant dirty work, pick and shovel work—or cleaning toilets.

One specialist at our hospital, a very good surgeon and a prominent one, caused a great furore when he refused absolutely to join a work brigade. The director was horrified.

"What will the inspectors say?"

"Blank the inspectors," I heard the specialist say, using a word that under the circumstances happily shocked me. "Just because the Government orders some stupid nonsense about me going around and collecting mattresses and junk . . . well, I'm not going to take on the responsibility for people's lives if I have to go out and get calluses on my operating hands. The Government can just make up its mind—shall I do operations or shall I collect junk? I'll do either, but I'm not going to do both."

"This is awful," the director said. "I'll get into awful trouble."

In some fashion, however, the director was able to persuade the Government to make an exception of this specialist, I suppose because he was such an able and prominent surgeon. But in the hospital we could not let such a joyous thing pass. So we made a cartoon and put it on the bulletin board. The drawing showed all the other doctors working under a large "Honour to Work" sign, and this one specialist running away from the work and on his back a sign which said "Peace to Work".

The increasing Communist presence. It pushed right into the hospital. When the order came to take the crosses down and no one would do it, there was a rumour that the Government was going to send men one night to do the job. So at night for a while I would take down the crosses

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in my children's rooms and hide them. The first night I was starting to take down the Cross over one boy's bed when he stopped me.

"Sister," he said suspiciously, "what are you doing to that Cross?"

"I'm just taking it down to clean it," I said.

"They said the same thing in school," he said. "They said they were taking the Cross down to paint it—only they never put it back. So if you want to dust that Cross, you just do it on the wall."

He was so stern about it that that particular Cross I had to leave up. But I took the others down for a while until it became clear that no one was going to take the crosses down, because no one wanted to be the one who took the crosses down.

Right into the hospital itself began coming some of the fruit of the Communist work, vivid and terrible fruit. One day an eighteen-year-old boy was brought to the hospital. He looked as if at one time he might have been a very good-looking boy. But now there were great scarred flat places on his head, as if from vicious blows. Now he was crippled, with one whole side of his body paralyzed. That boy—his name was Ivan—was in the hospital two months, and several operations were performed on him. During the two months I got to know him and I learned the source of the blows and paralysis.

A year before, Ivan had been living in a remote mountain village in eastern Slovakia. There he became the leader of an organization of young boys who were formed for one purpose only—to protect the village priest in case the police should ever come for him. I had heard of such youths'

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organizations springing up over Slovakia, especially in distant places in the mountain country where the people seldom saw police, were not accustomed to being interfered with by outsiders, and even now resisted with violence any Communist attempt to stick their noses into their lives. One day the police came for the priest, and the boys, led by Ivan, beat the police off, using only sticks and stones. But the next day the police were back, with reinforcements and machine guns. This time they took not only the priest but this boy Ivan as well. Both the priest and Ivan were sentenced to prison. After a year Ivan was released. The scarred flat places on his head and the paralysis in his side were souvenirs of his treatment in jail. He had come to the hospital direct from the jail.

About that year in jail he preferred not to talk. But one thing he used to repeat over and over to me.

"My dear sister," he would say, "you must hope you'll never get into the Government penitentiary."

The doctors had got Ivan too late for any operations to save him, though they tried desperately, and after one, he died. It was my duty to 'phone his father and tell him. The father came to the hospital. He was a big man, gnarled and rugged as the mountains which were his home. He stood looking down at his son's body.

There were no tears in his eyes, but something more, something fierce and defiant and very ancient. He stood looking down at his son's body—then he knelt by it and talked to it.

"Ivan, my son," he said. "You know how I loved you, and the future I dreamed of for you. Now I've come to say good-bye. You know and I know, my son, why you had to die.

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You had to die because you weren't afraid to protect our father in the village. And that's why you're my son, because you weren't afraid. I'm telling you, Ivan, that I'm proud of you and I will be proud of you for ever, because you died for the heavenly thing, and for that I pronounce you a martyr. God be with you, Ivan, and I will see you in heaven."

The father stood up and wrote out for me the address of the priest for whom the boy had given his life and who was still in jail.

"Sister," he said, his big mountaineer frame towering over me, "will you write to the priest? Will you tell him, please, that Ivan has finished his work on this earth."

There were many boys of about Ivan's age who were active against the Communists, and for their activity some ended up in our hospital, where our eyes learned unforgettably the reward for such work, which might be the smashed finger bones of a young student who had been caught typing anti-Communist letters, or might be feet deeply burned with branding irons.

And so the Communists wielded their tools—from "Crazy Kornel" to a branding iron. The evidences of the Communist sway might be seen in a half-paralyzed body lying on a hospital bed inside—or it might be seen merely by looking out of the window. One day a detachment of men wearing the grey uniform came to do some repair work on the hospital building. Soon I talked with them and knew who they were. Then one day when I went into the room of one of my children, I found him looking out the window at the workers. He asked me who they were.

"One of them is a priest," I said. "See the one who is pushing the wheelbarrow—he's a priest."

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"Dear Sister," the boy said, "why are they wearing prisoner's clothes? Did they steal something?"

I didn't know what to answer. The walls were growing ears now in our country, and I found myself being less free, even with the children.

"They haven't done anything," I went that far. "They're good people."

"Are all the people in jail good?"

"No, not all of them," I said. "Some of them are bad."

"Why are the good ones put with the bad ones and all put in jail?"

He was very inquisitive. So I said, "You ask your father when he comes to see you why the good ones are in jail. He'll know more about it. He's on the outside."

Next morning when I went in to see the boy, his eyes were shining.

"Dear Sister, I asked my father, and he told me," he said very loudly.

Then his voice got very quiet and secret, as if imparting to me some priceless information which I didn't know and which he had got from his father.

"Daddy," the boy whispered to me, "said some of the people in jail are bad but very few these days. He said those dirty Communists they're putting all the good people in jail. And I know what to do about it. When I grow big I'm going to join the police force and set fire to the jail and let all the good people out. Because if I don't they're liable to put my daddy in there, too. Because he's good."

The jail swelled, and the concentration camps, and the priests wearing heavy grey uniforms, and the nuns whom the government put practising Honour to Work in the



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fields. Now a nun who was still on the outside might go down the street in her habit, as happened one day to Sister Margita, to be greeted by a shrill cry from a little child putting her education into practice by calling out, "*Bosorka! Bosorka!* (Old witch! Old witch!)"

As the Communist power and boldness grew, I went one day to visit a little girl who had been one of my sick children with a broken leg and was now home recovering. I went with her mother into the back yard, where she started unpinning some dresses from a clothesline, and talking of those who were being taken.

"Pretty soon," the mother said, "you might have to go too, Sister. Times are changing so . . . one day to the next."

She was unpinning a dress from the line, and suddenly she turned to me.

"Sister," she said, "take one of these—it might come in handy."

I smiled. Times might be hard, but applied to myself, I couldn't even imagine myself out of my religious habit.

"No," I said. "It may be bad, but it won't get that bad."

"Please," the mother said. "Take one, Sister—at least it will make me feel better."

So I took the oldest dress, and also a kerchief she insisted on giving me, too. By this time nearly all the nuns were keeping a suitcase ready, with civilian clothes to flee in. Margita and I used to talk about how we might have to flee ourselves some day—but it never seemed real. Back in the hospital I stuck the dress and kerchief in the bottom of my suitcase and forgot about them.

God, by a gesture here, there, saves a life. That woman's

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insistence was to save mine, when my time came, from the hands of the Communists.

But before it came, God was to use me in a new and rich work, helping others to escape the hands which day by day reached out more greedily to take His own.

*Part Four*

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I ENROL IN THE UNDERGROUND

## 9

### A STRANGE NEW WORK

Now the way I, a nun and the daughter of a poor peasant, entered into the work of helping people to escape from the country was like this.

When I was at the convent, there lived there a priest who published a Catholic paper and prepared a few students for the priesthood. His name was Father Matej. The same one I used to make take off his shoes, like everyone else, when he visited my kindergarten. He was six feet high and solid as the stone, a man with courage for bones and devoutness for flesh. A slow-talking man who, unlike some I know, talked only when he had something to say. The Communists, when they came to power, quickly made him stop publishing the paper. Then, in 1919, a Catholic student who was working in the underground came and asked Father Matej if he could live with him and study, and Father Matej said yes. It happened that Father Matej knew nothing of the student's underground work, though, knowing Father Matej, I doubt that it would have made any difference.

Soon the authorities arrested the student and sent him to

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jail for eight years, and while they were at it, gave Father Matej six months in jail for "hiding" the youth. Four police came for him at the convent that August day in 1949. One waited at the front door. Three came to Father Matej's room after him. It was seven-thirty in the evening, and Father Matej was not in his room. He was in the garden and one of the sisters ran there and told him the police were there after him.

"You can slip out the back way, Father," the sister said.

"No," Father Matej said. "I don't feel guilty. I haven't done anything. I'm not slipping out."

So they took him and gave him the six-month sentence. He served four months of it in the local Bratislava jail, then two more in Leopoldov prison, where he worked in the fields.

When Father Matej got out of prison in 1950, he had rheumatism in the leg. I found a doctor and a hospital for him and made the doctor write out an agreement that he would not release him to the police if they happened to come, until he was well. I don't know what the doctor could have done about it had the police come, but at least I had a piece of paper. So Father Matej got well and left the hospital and had a parish near Bratislava.

It was a very pretty parish in the Carpathian foothills seven miles from Bratislava. The church was a very tiny old brick church, two centuries old, and stood at the end of the town on a hilltop amidst a grove of trees.

Father Matej was there only three weeks when the police came again to take him—for nothing.

He could have got away, for first the police sent word to him to come to the police station. But Father Matej knew

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by now that that is the way people suddenly disappear forever now in our country. So first he sent to the police station a member of his parish who was Catholic, but still Communist, too, as some, God forgive them, are. The police were angry that the man came instead of the priest, and they told the man they were going to go for the priest, but not to tell him or the man would get five years himself. So the man went back to Father Matej.

"Father," the man told him, "they're coming for you. But don't run away, or they will give me five years. I'm telling you, Father, so that you can prepare yourself."

So Father Matej gave away to his neighbours his valuable things like his typewriter, radio, and ciné camera, and this was his preparation for the coming of the Communists.

Two days after that there came two police cars with four men and one small bus with twenty more policemen. The Communist police, they always come in big bunches, like grapes, the tiny evil little grapes that never ripen. Father Matej was still celebrating Mass when they came. There were more police coming for him than there were people in church attending the Mass—there were enough to put down a riot. They waited in the grove of trees until he was through. Such nice manners, and like not coming up to my room later.

Then the Mass was over and Father Matej, a man there told me, walked out of the church. He stood there and looked at all the grapes and smiled a little and said to them: "You need so many?"

A week after Father Matej had been taken, I was coming out of my kindergarten class one day when a man wearing old clothes and looking very scared approached me.

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"Can you tell me where I can find Sister Cecilia?" he said.

"I am Sister Cecilia."

"Can we go to a private room?" this man said, and I took him to one.

Here, furtively, he showed me a paper. The paper was Father Matej's paper of conviction—for two years. I broke into big smiles, because I knew now he was alive and not in Siberia.

The man in the old clothes explained that he had established a contact with Father Matej in prison, and that he had a way of smuggling things to him.

"What does he need?" I asked.

"Food and money," the man said.

So I made up a big parcel of food—bacon, salami, cheese, and bread—and weighted the man down with it and gave him 400 crowns also to take to Father Matej. Three weeks later the man appeared again with a letter in Father Matej's handwriting saying that he had received the package. I made another package and sent it to him by this man. But this second package never reached Father Matej, for I got word that this courier was caught.

For ten months then I had not one word from Father Matej. And I didn't know if he was dead or alive. Meantime my school was taken away from me by the Communists, and I went to work in the hospital. Then it was April of 1915. I was in the hospital preparing lunch of rice and a little meat for the children when a sister came and said some young gentleman was waiting to see me.

I walked into the corridor, and there stood a young man I had known as a student of Father Matej. He handed me a

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letter. There was no writing on the outside. Something made me take that letter into the shower room to read.

I opened the letter. It was from Father Matej! A great deal had happened to him. First they took him to Novaky prison. Then to Muceniky prison, where they worked him in the labour gangs on the road. But one day on the road he escaped. He went into hiding, and then one night he tried to cross the border into Austria with twenty other priests, who attempted to swim the River Morava, which is the border, with life belts tied around their waists. But the river was very swollen, and they were turned back. Coming back through the fields, the party of priests was attacked by police, and most were caught. Father Matej got away. Now he was in hiding in a small town with an old lady who had great courage, but he was afraid to stay there any longer. You cannot stay long in any one hideout, as I learned in my own hiding later, but must go from hole to hole. At the end of the letter Father Matej asked me one thing:

Could I find him a hideout for a little while in Bratislava before he tried again for the border?

At the time I never thought. I just went back and told the student to tell Father Matej—yes.

“Come back to me in three days,” I told the student.

Now I had to get back to the children, for their lunch was getting cold. Sometimes when I sat and fed them I talked to them about religion, for I cannot be with children and not teach them religion. And while I fed them, they would ask me questions about Holy God. Now as I fed them, some so sick you had to feed them yourself with a spoon, they were asking questions, and all the time I was trying to make talk, but hardly hearing a word they said or I said.



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I was very excited and I was trying to calm my excitement down and think, "How in the world am I going to get a place for Father Matej?" And, "Why did he ask me?"

"Maybe," I thought, "it is because I have the show of calmness coming from a strength from God." Then I stopped and asked Saint Joseph to forgive me this pride. And then I made myself stop wondering why he asked me and got back to, How?

I was on duty all day and all night, as sometimes happened when we had extra patients or operations or some were suddenly brought in hurt, and to ask for time off would have been suspicious. So I concentrated to keep calm, though within me I was not so calm, to keep the other sisters from becoming suspicious of what I was about to be up to. Next morning when I got off, I went straight to look. I went among the families I trusted most.

The first people, they were afraid. Reason to be afraid. The second people, though, who were parents of a boy I had taught in kindergarten, they promised to keep Father if it was not too long, and they gave me a key to their house.

The third day the student came back, and I gave him the key to give to Father Matej. Father sent word back through the student that he would try to get into Bartislava on 1 May, which is the day of the great Communist celebrations when many people are travelling—he would try to get in amongst the crowds.

It was very dangerous for him to come, despite the crowds. On that 1 May holiday, one I hated to take, with the Communist flags on the hospital and everywhere like blood, I stayed in my room on my knees all the time I was not with the children and stared out into the crowds shout-

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ing on the streets and prayed. All the time I was hoping he would make it and praying to Saint Joseph to bring him in.

"Saint Joseph," I prayed, "You were a human being just like us. Bring him in."

That night I went to the house of the people, and he was there. He had been a big, solid, and healthy man, and I was shocked at how thin and tired he looked, and I thought of all his months in prison and hiding. He was dressed in civilian clothes and something else, too.

"The moustache, Father!" I said. "You have a moustache!"

He smiled wanly. "The best fashion, Sestricka, among the priests who escape. You did well for me," he said. "Holy Saviour maybe has found a new work for you."

"Holy Saviour and you, Father," I said, smiling. And then I thought, with a flash of terror, "*Has found*," he said, as if this were the beginning of something." "Why did you pick me, Father?" I said aloud.

And he said, "Sestricka, you were always the calm one. This work is not for the un-calm people."

"Calm?" I said. "Father, you should listen to my heart."

"The heart, too, Sestricka," he said, "comes from God. God will give you all the heart you need."

And I thought, "*Will give*," he said, as if there were more in the future."

"Sestricka," Father Matej was saying, "there is more work for you," and my heart beat even faster.

"I must go across the river, Sestricka," he said. "And you must help me get across."

And now my heart pounded. "I, Father?" I said, and pointed to myself.

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"You, Sestricka," he said, and smiled a little and pointed at me, too.

"But I don't know anybody, Father . . .

Then I was looking at him, and suddenly I felt terribly ashamed of myself. He looked worn and suffering, and only God in heaven knew what he had been through. And here I, who by comparison had had it so easy, who was still wearing my religious habit while he, a priest, sat there in those shabby civilian clothes . . . here I was hesitating.

"I will find someone, Father," I said, and tried to make my voice firmer than my heart felt.

But to find someone. How did one go about getting someone across the border? As I sat there with Father Matej and tried to realize the awful responsibility that was suddenly mine, all the barriers that one must overcome in this work threw themselves up in front of me in frightening array, like a series of ever-higher walls. I, Cecilia, was in the underground, and so quickly I hardly realized how I got there. I thought of the newspapers that daily told stories of people who had been caught trying to escape—stories published as a warning to any who might think to try. Bratislava was right on the border, which made these stories seem very near. To escape successfully there were so many barriers to get through. There was not merely the barrier of heavy guards at the border. There was the barrier of the informer, for the reward for turning someone in started at 50,000 crowns and went upwards to 100,000 crowns, depending on the value of the person who was trying to escape. Even after you got started across the border, you could never be sure of your leader. For even among these were Judases. The lowest of these were "leaders" who

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would deliberately take some across to safety, in order to establish a reputation for trustworthiness. Then, armed with letters of recommendation from those they had taken across, they would induce others to go with them, and then lead a group larger than any they had taken to safety straight into the hands of the police. This, I remembered now, had been what had happened to two medical students I knew, Vincko and Andrej. I didn't know they had tried to flee until their mother came one day to the hospital and asked me, knowing that I knew them, "Have you seen Vincko and Andrej?" I hadn't, and I didn't know what had happened to them until their names, too, appeared one day in the newspaper. A man had come to them, I later learned, offering to take them across the border at the bargain rate of 5,000 crowns each. Then he had reported his plan to the police, who captured his whole party near the border and released the leader. Fincko and Andrej collected five years in prison each, and the "leader", in addition to the 10,000 crowns he had got from them, collected another 100,000 crowns from the Government for these two alone. Judas silver.

And now I, a nun with almost no direct knowledge of such ways, had committed myself to helping this friend, this priest, through this devilish series of barriers. Where to turn? Whom to trust?

Maybe God was listening to my thoughts. For soon, as Father Matej and I were talking, the mother of the house came in and she said, "I know a boy named Pavol."

Pavol was a twenty-two-year-old youth who had gone across the border himself. After nine months in Austria, he had recently returned to try to persuade his parents to try to escape too. I knew the family and they were good people.

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His parents didn't want to go, but perhaps this Pavol, the mother now said, having escaped once himself . . . perhaps he knew a way.

So we sent for this Pavol that same night. He sat quietly and listened, and then he spoke.

"There is a young woman in Bratislava named Zofia," Pavol said. "She goes to a commercial school here. Her father is a peasant who has a hay field on the River Morava. But his main money these troublesome days comes not from the hay field. It comes from operating a boat. A boat which takes people across the Morava."

"Can he be trusted?" I said at once.

"He has taken many across," said Pavol.

"So have others," I said, thinking of the false leaders, "—until one day the Government holds large money out in front of them."

"I know that," Pavol said. "But it is necessary to trust someone, Sister. Otherwise Father Matej will sit here until he had not only a moustache, but a long grey beard to go with it. And this peasant can be trusted. If he were going to turn into a weasel for the Government, he would have been a weasel long since."

Pavol waited, held his hands open a moment, looking at them, then looked up at me.

"Sister, it is up to you and Father Matej. If you wish, I will send Zofia to you."

I waited for Father Matej to speak first. For it was his life that was the price of a mistake here.

"Send her," Father Matej said. "What chance there is to take, I will take rather than sit any longer in this plagued country. And in any case, if I sit much longer, I will not sit. I will hang."

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"Send her, Pavol," I said. "Send her quickly."

But it was several days, for Zofia was out of town, before one day at the hospital a sister told me someone was waiting to see me downstairs. I went down to the reception room and there she stood, this Zofia.

She was a large blonde girl, weighing about twelve stone, and only about eighteen years old. She looked both pleasant and businesslike, and she looked you straight in the eye. I thanked God for that good first impression I had and prayed Him to guide me very carefully now.

"Are you Sister Cecilia?" she said.

"I am."

"I am Zofia. Pavol sent me."

I said, "Won't you sit down?"

Here we were, in the same room where I had decided to be a nun that faraway day when I had first met the sisters of my order and this room had rung with laughter and happiness. It had changed very little. The same light green walls, though many a new coat of paint since then. Different furniture, but of the same kind as before. The same small statue of Jesus on the table in the corner. On the wall, a different Holy Father, but the same Our Lady of Lourdes looked down upon us. Here I had once entered the work I chose for my life. Here now I was about to enter a work I had never thought I would enter anywhere, and particularly in this room.

"Sister," Zofia said, "let me tell you at the very beginning—you must be very quiet about this."

"I understand," I said.

"What my father is doing is very dangerous."

"I understand. You can trust me."

## *A Strange New Work*

She looked very closely into my eyes, and I into hers. I found in hers trustworthiness. It was a judgment of instinct and, I prayed, from God—but instinct and God were the only altars to which I could turn.

“My father, he does it for money,” Zofia was saying, almost apologetically and, I suppose, to get to that part of it.

“For one thing,” she added, “it costs a lot to send me to commercial school.”

So she told me the smuggling price: To smuggle one across was 15,000 crowns! I saw Zofia had learned much business. Fifteen thousand crowns—it was five months’ salary for the average worker. This farmer’s daughter had an exact arrangement with her father whereby he kept 10,000 of the payment and she 5,000, which she used to pay for her schooling, and she had one of the most unusual ways of working her way through school that I, a teacher, had seen yet. You paid her 5,000 down before they took anybody, she told me, and the 10,000 to her father when you arrived at the farm and before you set foot in his boat.

“It is very dangerous work,” she repeated. She waited, then said: “Shall we do business, you and I?”

“Yes,” I said, “we shall do business.”

Then she told me the arrangements.

Her father’s place was about thirty miles from Bratislava. Austria was actually right across the river from Bratislava, but there it was not safe to cross, being too well guarded and the Danube river being too broad there, too. It was necessary to go to a place which was more remote and cross the Morava River which was not so wide and try to get over the border there. Zofia would provide a van and the driver for the trip from Bratislava, and would go personally with

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Father Matej to take him to her father. As soon as I paid her the 5,000-crown down payment, Father Matej was to stand by, and she would let me know the time, and I, him.

"There is one other important thing," she said. "It is this: My father's hay field is directly on the Morava. But each time he goes there to tend his crop he must, for that very reason, get permission from the authorities. He goes every three or four days. But he is given the permission only the day before, so that he knows very little in advance. Therefore, anyone who is to escape must be ready on my father's farm and wait for the day of permission. He cannot wait in Bratislava. Then there would not be time to get him there. Sometimes it happens that the permission to go to the hay field is not granted except for as much as a week apart, instead of three or four days. In that case the person trying to escape must return temporarily to whatever city he is hiding in and wait for another time. For it is too dangerous to stay that long on my father's farm. If that happens, I turn him back to you and it is your responsibility—not mine—to hide him until we are ready again. Is that all clear?"

"It is clear," I said.

"Have you any questions, Sister?" she said, businesslike.

"No, I believe not," I said. "I will see about the money and let you know."

She got up to go. "It is very dangerous business," she said again. "It is nice to have the money but I wish my father would get out of it. It is dangerous and it gets more dangerous. Good-bye, Sister."

When she left, I spent an hour wondering where I was to get the money. Fifteen thousand crowns! I had never seen that much money in my whole life.



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I was still wondering in the afternoon when a sister came and said two men wanted to see me. I went down and found waiting for me in the corridor two men in workers' clothes I had never seen before. I took them quickly to the reception room.

"Who are you?" I demanded at once.

"Be calm, Sister," one said. "We are not the enemy."

They were, they said, priests—one a Jesuit, the other of the congregation of *Tesitela Bozskeho Srdca* (Consoler of the Divine Heart). At first I thought they might be spies, and on an excuse I stepped out and went to ask the Mother Superior if she knew anything about them, without telling her why I wanted to know. She told me she had seen them standing in the corridor and that she knew the Jesuit as a priest. Then I went back to the reception room, and they told me their mission.

They came from Father Matej, they said, and they wanted help to get across the river, too! "Forty-five thousand crowns!" I instantly thought. Now I was in this business wholesale.

I told the two priests to tell me where they were hiding and I would see what I could do and come and tell them. I sent them away and sat down a moment wondering how Holy Saviour put me in all this. It had all happened so fast. It seemed to require so much.

Then I sent for Zofia again, hoping perhaps to get a special rate for three. She did not come until the next day. No, she said. It was 15,000 straight.

"Sister," she reminded me, "this is very dangerous business my father and I do. It is not like the taking of shorthand."

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With which you could not argue. So I sent her away again and told her I would have word for her very soon, but to make preparations for three persons rather than one.

I knew I must hurry. Father Matej was very unsafe in this city. Also, by leaving him where he was, I was endangering the people who had so courageously taken him in. He was a big man, and even that made it harder to hide him. I had been sending him food, and the family had been sending me messages wondering when their guest would be on his way, not that they didn't like Father Matej but things being as they were. . . . So I had to hurry.

So I got the money, how, I must not tell. I got more. I got some United States dollars, for I had a use for these, too.

Quickly I sent for Zofia and paid her 15,000 crowns, the down payment for three. But then there were several more days of agonizing delay before she got in touch with her father again and arranged the timing. Finally one day she came and gave me instructions to give the three priests and gave me the time—the next night.

I went to see Father Matej where he was staying. I passed on the instructions. I gave him 10,000 crowns to give Zofia's father. With some sewing materials I had brought along, I sewed into the shoulder of his coat some of the United States dollars for his use in Austria across the border—provided he got there.

I left and went to where the other two priests were staying. I repeated the instructions, gave them 10,000 crowns each, sewed dollars in their clothes.

The next night it began.

Zofia, riding in the front seat with the driver, picked up the three priests in a van which carried pitchforks and

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shovels in the back. The three priests, wearing old patched trousers and peaked caps, according to her instructions, climbed into the back of the van with the pitchforks. Now, by a nice transformation, they were no longer priests. They were field workers going to work for Zofia's father the farmer, thirty miles from Bratislava.

And so I waited, all nerves, and did not move once from the hospital. I waited word from Zofia either that they were across the river or that her father's permission to go to his Morava field had been delayed and that the three priests would need hiding places again in Bratislava, hiding places which I would need to find them. The hours passed like ages, then one day, and then another.

Then the third day, Zofia appeared. The moment I walked into the hospital reception room and saw her, I knew that all was not well.

"Tell me," I said. "Tell me quickly, did they get caught?"

"No, Sister," she said quietly. "Don't look so alarmed. They didn't get caught. They are well."

I breathed heavily. "Thank God. But tell me! Where are they?"

"They're in a barn on my father's farm," Zofia said, "waiting for him to get permission to go to his hay field."

"Still waiting!" I said.

"Unless the permission comes soon," she said, "I'm going to bring them back here. I'll have word for you very soon, Sister—some word."

She left, and I continued to stay all the time in the hospital. I couldn't believe time could pass so slowly. I imagined everything happening to Father Matej and the other two. Each morning the first thing, I grabbed the

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newspaper expecting to see a story with a headline, "Three More Priests Caught at Border". I felt guilty, as if I had been responsible for their capture.

Then I told myself to be calm and stop imagining, that there was no reason to believe they had been captured—and I prayed mightily to Saint Joseph.

Late one afternoon I was upstairs giving one of my children her lunch when a sister came and told me a young lady was downstairs. I stopped a forkful of food I was carrying to the child's mouth and ran down. I walked into the reception room and she was standing there and I looked at her and I knew.

"They're across," she said.

Impulsively, I threw my arms around big Zofia and hugged and kissed her. She was quite armful.

Then I thanked Saint Joseph.

One week later I heard that Father Matej and the two other priests were in the U.S. zone of Austria. The joy I felt!

I thanked Saint Joseph, who from a poor nun had created a vessel of escape. And now happiness filled me to have two works for the Lord. His little children in the hospital. And His bigger children He wanted across the River Morava. Strange work, that one! Where none knew the others in it, or very few, but each doing as God tells when the fleeing ones come to you.

At this time also I did a work of sending packages of food to priests in prison. The main obstacle here was a Communist employee, the hospital doorman, put there to round off their system of checks on the sisters. He was supposed to check all outgoing packages. To get round this I had the

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messenger who came for the food packages always ask, not for me, but to see a certain child in a certain room on a certain floor—one of my children. Then I would take the messenger into a private sitting-room and give him the package—of food wrapped inside children's soiled clothes. On leaving, the messenger would explain to the doorman that the package contained clothes from the child he had been to see and was taking home to the child's family to be laundered. In this manner we helped to feed hungry priests, who were seldom given enough food in prison.

But this was merely side-work, my more serious business being with the ones not in prison, but trying for the border. Across my eyes always were the stories of those who were caught trying to escape, stories that the Government-controlled newspapers could not display prominently enough, stories that were grim warnings of the reward for failure—stories that told of people slain at the border, of people captured, and of the jail sentences or executions that so quickly and automatically followed.

But if these names in newspapers were not warning enough, there were direct warnings in people you knew who one day suddenly disappeared, and you knew they were for the border, and many of whom you next heard of in a jail—or worse. For the Communists had worse reckonings even than a Communist jail, which itself is not a matter of merely serving a certain number of years, but frequently of emerging in physical or mental collapse. There was a young woman doctor at our hospital who lived to see what reckonings the Communists have.

Kristina was only twenty-six years old, but a brilliant surgeon. She operated on several of the children I cared for.

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She was a slim, very energetic, really bouncing girl. She was as devoted to her profession as a good priest is to his, she was a born surgeon. She was also a very happy, warm, and sweet person, and all but worshipped by both the sisters and the children. She had a remarkable way with children. Sometimes when they wouldn't eat for anyone else, she would come into the room of some child she had operated on, sit down by the bed, take one spoon of food herself to show the child it was good, then give the child a spoon, which he would then take, having seen "Miss Doctor" do so. She was very good with the children—and a first-rate doctor by any standard.

We were always short of doctors, and Kristina worked very hard, living at the hospital and working very long hours. This was the kind of doctor she was. She wasn't married, and we used to think it would be a lucky husband who got her. Then she met a young engineer who used to come to see her a great deal at the hospital, and one day Kristina told all the sisters that she was going to marry this man, and the sisters and the children were very happy about this. The wedding was set for five o'clock in the church one day in 1950. The afternoon of Kristina's wedding day four children were brought into the hospital with severe wounds they had suffered when a hand grenade, left there from the war, had exploded in the garden of their home several miles from Bratislava. It was a ghastly sight when they were brought in. One was so mutilated you could hardly tell whether he was dirt or a child; one was badly wounded in his head; one had his leg almost torn off; one, the one who had picked up the grenade, had lost both hands. The first child died a few minutes after being brought into the hospital,

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before he could be operated on. But Kristina went efficiently and coolly to work operating on the other three children. The children were brought in at about two in the afternoon, and at four-thirty she was still operating when one of the sisters came into the operating room. I was helping in the blood transfusions.

"You're getting married at five," the sister reminded the doctor. "The priest will be waiting for you in the church."

"The priest has lots of time," Kristina snapped. "I've got work to do."

She stayed there until she had finished the operations. Then the last child was gone from the operating room. Kristina, in her white operating gown spotted with blood, ran to her room and put on her white bridal gown. She got married, though not at five o'clock.

Next year she and her husband had a baby—after Kristina had worked right through most of her pregnancy, we were so short of doctors. Towards the last of it there were times, when she got so big, that we thought she was going to have her baby right there in the operating room, she was so unwilling to stop her work. But she had the baby, and not in the operating room, and all the sisters were in a state of marvel at this remarkable young woman Kristina.

Soon after their baby came, her husband had to leave the country. I never knew exactly what it was, though I think he was in some sort of trouble with the Communists. But he left.

Then, one summer day in 1911, when her baby was only a few weeks old and not long after I had helped Father Matej across the border, Kristina disappeared from the hospital without saying a word to anyone. It was the saddest time I

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ever saw in that hospital, but beneath the sadness there was a certain happiness that she had gone on to join her husband, which we guessed, but which no one ever talked about.

We waited, every one of us, for some kind of word.

The first word we got was when Kristina's baby was brought to the hospital a week after she had disappeared—brought there by the police.

After that, every few hours, the police would come for the child and take it to be breast fed. They took it to the jail, where its mother was.

Kristina had tried to escape with her baby across the border without saying a word to anyone in the hospital—though that was the way anyone fleeing usually went, without a word. She had gone to join her husband. But at the border she and her baby were caught.

Now, day after day, several times a day, the police came and took the little baby to be fed by its mother in the jail, where she waited for the Communists to decide her punishment. Back and forth they took it.

The Communists decided: Kristina was given a two-year sentence. But in their generosity the Communists deferred the serving of the sentence until the baby was one year old. And Kristina was released. But she did not come back to the hospital and continue the surgery which she loved and at which she was so brilliant. The Communists tempered their generosity by forbidding her ever again to practice medicine. So she had to go to work doing cleaning and scrubbing work, working in the fields digging sugar beets, any work she could get to support herself and her baby—and wherever she went a policeman accompanied her, to make sure both



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that she didn't practice medicine and that she would be around a year from now to be put back in jail.

The Communists had reckonings worse even than a Communist jail.

I would think of ones like Kristina, of what could happen to mine if they were caught. And I would think, too, of what would happen to myself if I were found out. For the penalty for those who helped people escape was worse even than for those who were caught trying to escape.

Then, on 3 September 1911, another priest in worker's clothes came to me in the hospital. This one came without writing a letter first, but his hurry was excusable: He had been condemned for his anti-Government activities to be hanged. He wanted to take with him a seminarian who was hiding on the edge of Bratislava. Now I was more efficient, not losing my head so quickly. I hid the priest in the X-ray room, which fortunately was not in use that night. For this one I had to work extremely fast because of the sentence. I sent for Zofia that same night. The notice was so short she could not even get a van. She and the priest and the seminarian went on a train to her father the farmer.

Tensely I awaited word that they were safely across, for my work was never done until then. I did not stir from the hospital, waiting there in case the permission for Zofia's father to go to his Morava River hay field was delayed and they would have to return to Bratislava, where I would need to get them another place to hide.

Next day Zofia came to report that she had delivered the priest and the seminarian safely to her father's farm, where they waited for their attempt across. On that visit she lingered a little to tell me how worried she was getting

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for her father. Her fear was right, for later I heard the farmer was captured, about two months later, and many of his crowns with him.

In this work all need fear. The priest, the farmer's daughter, the nun. The shortest profession in all God's world is surely the agent of escape in a Communist country. So many trails, and cross-trails that are left, so many people who have to know, so many informers with the eager palm. What trails I had left that were caught up I did not learn until long later. It cannot be helped; in any case, that soon they come for you, the bunch of evil grapes comes. If God kisses you, you receive the golden gift of a moment's warning.

God kissed me twice, for I had two warnings, and the first I threw away. So that God must have been greatly with me to kiss me again.

On 6 September, as I was waiting word from Zofia on the priest and the seminarian, I decided I would take a chance and leave the hospital only long enough to go to church very early in the morning, before Zofia was likely to come, and then quickly visit my brother Edo, who was in another hospital in Bratislava sick with yellow fever. I left the hospital straight after night duty, which I had that night, and went to the church. It was one where I didn't go often, the Capuchin Fathers church, a huge church over 200 years old, but I went to it now because it was on the way to Edo's hospital. I took Holy Communion. I said a prayer for those of mine who were crossing the border. Then I went and saw Edo and came back. I had not been gone long altogether, but when I got back to our hospital there was a message for me, but not from Zofia.

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"Sister," one of the sisters told me, "they want to see you at the main state hospital. A man was here in a van—an ambulance it was, with the red cross on it—to take you. He looked like a male nurse—he was dressed in white."

"The state hospital?" I said. This was another state hospital, for adults, with Sisters of the Holy Cross as nurses. "What in the world would they want with me at the state hospital?"

The sister shrugged. "I don't know. The man said the director there wanted to see you."

"The director?" I said.

Immediately I was suspicious and on my guard. Particularly so since this came just at the time when I had helped the priest and the seminarian to get to the farm of Zofia's father and had not even heard yet that they were across the border. The state hospital—why, I thought, that is only a street away. If they wanted me for something, why would they go to the trouble to send a man in an ambulance for me? Why didn't they just pick up the 'phone and ask me to walk over? Perhaps, I thought, they were being courteous. There were still a few left who were that way towards nuns.

I went in to see Sister Margita. In the hospital I had this best friend—Margita, the nurse. She was always a very happy girl, happy-go-lucky really, her attitude being, "I will do all I can, so let's not worry." Some two can understand each other, some two can't. Margita and I could, and had for years. We talked it over and decided the best thing was for me to walk over to the state hospital, but for her to go with me. Like that, in case for any reason I might be kept there, she could come back and report.

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So Margita and I went. Every step of the short walk to the hospital I prayed, or really I talked, to Saint Joseph, telling him not to let anything happen to me. "I haven't done anything bad," I told him, "so don't let anything happen to me."

In five minutes we were at the state hospital, a creamy stucco building of four stories which occupied a whole block. We asked to see the director and had to wait a while. The director of the state hospital was an important person.

Then we were shown into his office, a very large carpeted office where he sat behind one of the largest desks I had ever seen. He looked perplexed and a little irritated at two mere sisters calling. I told him quickly that I was from the children's hospital.

"Did you send for me?" I asked.

"Did I send for you?" he said, as if this were the strangest notion he had ever heard of. "Sister, why in the world should I send for you? I don't even know you."

I told the director a man who had said he was from his hospital had called for me in an ambulance while I was away from the children's hospital.

"Sister," he said impatiently. "I don't know what this is all about. Go back to your hospital," and he busily shuffled some papers on his desk to show we were holding up his important work. "If I ever need you, I'll send for you."

"Thank you, sir," I said gratefully.

Margita and I left and went back to the children's hospital. I felt some relief, and thanked Saint Joseph, but I was still worried. We went to Sister Margita's room and sat trying to figure it out.

Suddenly Sister Margita looked at me. "Cecilia," she said

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slowly, "I may be wrong—I may be over-alarmed—but do you know what I think? I think that 'male nurse' in the ambulance was from the police."

"The police?" I said, and suddenly felt a quavering in my stomach. "Why would the police come like that?"

"The police don't want it to be noticeable that they are taking a nun away," Margita said. "So they chose that way to come for you. It is a cover so they won't have to drag a sister to the police station openly in a police car. These people are clever enough to try to avoid all public incidents of being against religion. This is all a guess, of course, but it is my guess."

I was extremely terrified. I couldn't say a word.

"Cecilia, you'd better get away," Margita said. "Go away, and if my guess happens to be wrong—and it might be—you can come back in a couple of days."

"But I can't leave now, Margita!" I burst out.

I was thinking about the priest and the seminarian—I hadn't heard they were across the border yet. Something might happen. Anything could always happen. I might be needed. At the least, there was always a good chance I might have to hide them back here again.

Sister Margita tried to persuade me to go.

"I can't," I said. If anything ever happened to the priest and the seminarian because I had run away myself, I knew I couldn't face it.

Margita shrugged. "As you will then, Cecilia. But I think you're making a mistake."

I went back to my room. I sat a while on my bed. Then I knelt down and prayed to Saint Joseph, asking him to help me if I needed help now and didn't know it.

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I sat back on the bed. Suddenly, a huge tiredness seemed to come over me. I had not been to sleep since my night watch. I felt a total exhaustion from all the worry and fear of the last few days, the going, going, going, and all on top of my regular work at the hospital, moving up and possessing me. I found myself, almost in a daze, taking off my clothes and getting under the sheets. "Some sleep," I thought hazily, "I must have a little sleep."

When I was awakened from a very heavy sleep, it was by someone shaking me hard and to a sister standing over me pale and quivering. Instantly terrified, I sat up in the bed.

"Jesus Mary Joseph!" the sister was wailing. "Sister! Oh, Sister! Four policemen are waiting for you downstairs, and four cars more of them outside!"

But I still had God when the police came—God and the blue polka-dot dress.

*Part Five*

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I FLEE FROM THE COMMUNISTS

## IO

### THE BLUE POLKA-DOT DRESS

DUSK is just starting to fall when I walk from the hospital, through the police cordon, wearing the blue polka-dot dress. I am carrying with me into this new life of hiding nothing from my old life but the two pictures, the stained picture of Saint Joseph I have had since a girl when I locked myself in the cellar-room and prayed and the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help I have had from the time I made the first promise to be a nun. The sin and the fear I feel! The sin for the dress. The fear, near to fainting, of capture. For they do their worst of all to those who have helped people escape, like me. Walking through the dusk, I think of the priests I know who have come back with stories one would not believe if one did not see their faces. Of the Communists putting big rats in their shirts. Of putting them in an electric box the size of a telephone booth and shining thousands of watts of light on them until they go almost crazy. Of priests with ripped ears and teeth broken by lead pipes, and bones by kicking, of priests emerging from prison grey-haired at thirty or with nervous breakdowns from having been driven crazy. I have never



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known anything near torture and do not know how much I can bear, even if God is with me. I cannot be captured. Yet my religion forbids me to kill myself if I am in danger of capture, as I am very much now. So it is that I know fear like unto the valley of the shadow as I walk down the street. A place to go! Where to go?

Now I start the living in holes. I become a kind of fox.

The first hole is an apartment of four girls I know, especially Veronika, who is about my age and whose good heart now comes glowing to my mind. Her good heart, and also the fact I had helped her once and so she might now help me, and that she knows from experience what it is to be in the hands of the Communists and would understand my need. Veronika had spent a year in a Communist prison.

It was a very trifling thing that earned Veronika that year, not that the Communists ever needed too much to give a jail sentence.

She was a cheerful but very shy girl when I first knew her. She worked as a secretary. One day in 1919 she was on her way to work when a policeman stopped her and asked to see her identification. She was so shy, and the ways of the Communists were already known enough to our people, that as she opened her purse, her hands began to tremble. Suddenly the purse fell to the street and several objects fell out. One of the objects was an anti-Communist pamphlet.

Veronika, poor thing, had never engaged in the slightest anti-Communist activity. She had merely received the pamphlet through the post—at that time many such anti-Communist pamphlets were being mailed around by under-

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ground groups. Nevertheless the policeman pounced on the pamphlet as if it were a bomb and triumphantly hauled this terrified girl off to the police station.

They kept her for one year—a year of cross-examination about her “anti-Communist” work. Once I took her some blankets in the jail and a few times, some food.

When they finally let her out, having needed a year of questioning to find out that there was nothing to find out from her, she was never entirely the same. They took her secretary’s job away from her, as they had taken Kristina the doctor’s job away from her, but allowed her to take a job operating a machine in a factory. She moved into a small flat with three other girls. Her hair had begun to grey fifteen years before its time, and she had a tendency to tremble at the slightest disturbance, such as even seeing a policeman standing on a corner.

I feel very unhappy about going to visit her. For her, and for myself as well, for once you had been in jail, the police always kept an eye on you after you got out, even though it had been a year ago, as in Veronika’s case. But I know nowhere else to go. And her place is near to the hospital, only a few streets away.

So I go to her, and when I come in all the four girls are there.

At first they do not recognize me, in the lay clothes. When they do, they all give a cry as if from a sharp pain.

“Sister! The dress . . .”

And they point at me.

“The police are after me,” I say. “Give me one night . . .”

But they leave the flat quickly, all four of them. I understand, for I have said what they do if you are caught hiding

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a person in Czechoslovakia. But at this moment I feel the aloneness like a tomb.

Then, about an hour later, Veronika comes back.

"Sister," she says, "I cannot leave you alone."

I am nearly in tears with gratitude to her, and especially knowing the danger to her and what they would do to her if they caught her a second time.

"Sister," she says, "you must be careful you don't get in jail." She looks at me, and I see tears in her own eyes, and her lips quivering. She has never spoken one word to me of how they had treated her that year in jail. She didn't need to. You have only to look at her.

"Sister," she says now, "you must not get in jail. I know what it is."

Veronika makes tea for us. It is a very modest two-roomed flat, and we pull the blinds down and sit there, talking and drinking the tea.

"Why are they after you, Sister?" she asks. She gives a short, mirthless laugh. "Is it for anything?"

"Veronika," I say. "Yes, it is for something. I have been helping people to get across the border."

I see the old terror in her eyes again. "You, Sister? But for that, if they catch you, they will . . ."

"It is too bad they blocked my road so soon," I say. "I was just getting started doing this work."

She looks very directly at me, her eyes very big. "Sister, you must get out of Bratislava . . ." Then she begins to cry quietly. "I wish I knew somebody somewhere out of Bratislava . . . but I don't know anybody," she cries, as if somehow she had let me down for not knowing someone that lived away from the city.

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"Don't cry, Veronika," I say. "Don't cry, sweet one. They haven't got me yet, the police haven't."

"The police," she echoes that word, an echo of fear. Suddenly she stands up. "I must look around."

Before I can stop her, she had gone out the door. That is a very brave thing she does, to go and look around. When she comes back, about fifteen minutes later, she tells me there are no police in front of the apartment house. She had also walked towards the hospital, but had stopped a block from it.

"The hospital is surrounded with them," she says. "It is all lighted up, and there must be a dozen police cars there. Oh, Sister! I wanted to stop at the shop to get some food, but I was afraid."

"I'm not very hungry anyhow," I say.

We go to bed. I sleep very little, thinking of the police still so near at the hospital and wondering what is happening there, and thinking all through the night about what to do. In the next bed I hear Veronika tossing, getting even less sleep than me.

Next day Veronika goes to work and I am again alone, and feel it. I pray and I concentrate all together, thinking over and over again, "What kind of life am I starting now?" Wherever I start to think, everything is black in front of me. Whichever way I turn my thoughts, I see only the dark night, and everywhere, in my mind, they are chasing me.

Veronika had promised to try to get off work early and to be back by three o'clock in the afternoon. At four she is not there. Finally it comes six o'clock, and she still has not come. Now I am very worried for fear they may have caught her—worried for her and for myself, that they may torture it out

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of her about me. I know now that for the sake of both of us I must go soon and not stay long in this flat so near to the hospital.

It is a little after six when I hear a knock on the door and I jump. I think, "Oh, Saint Joseph. If it were Veronika," I think, "she would not knock." I say nothing, but sit very quietly. Then the knock comes again . . . and then once more.

Then through the keyhole, very softly. I hear a voice. "Open the door."

It is Agnesa, one of Veronika's roommates. She has no key, having left it in the apartment when she fled the evening before.

I let her in, and she tells me why Veronika has not come: she has fainted at work from the nervous fear, for her heart has been weak from the time she spent in jail. They have taken her to a hospital. She will be all right, Agnesa says, but she will have to spend the night at the hospital. Now I know I must leave tonight. "I can't stay here," I think, "or they'll all die of fear. I can't get these people into such trouble because of myself." Agnesa leaves. I write a note to Veronika where I am going and a little after dark I start out again into the night.

Now, being on the streets, I am starting to be frantic. I am thinking only of each few hours ahead: Where can I stay for one night, or perhaps two, until I decide what to do? I think now to stay for a while with the family of two little children I had taught at the convent. The mother, Ludmila, is a very sweet soul, kind and courageous and reliable. Also, their house is on the edge of Bratislava and away from the main part.

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Going across the town in the chilly September night, I keep on the side streets and in the shadows close to the buildings, away from the brightness of the night that glistens down on the old cobblestones. I hear my shoes against them like the beating of drums. It is an awful fear within me, far and away killing the hunger from not having eaten for over twenty-four hours. I walk fast, keeping my head down and talking all the way over with Saint Joseph, who is my closest saint and person always, and to whom I talk much, though sometimes I have lost patience with him and gone for long periods without speaking to him for not getting me what I ask, though usually he does so all right. In thirty minutes I am at the house and bring the bell.

The husband, Dominik, by profession a waiter, answers. He is a tall man, skinny, about forty-eight, and doesn't look too healthy ever, and at this moment even less so. He, neither, recognizes me in the lay clothes. Then I ask if I can come in, and then inside, he recognizes me. Quickly he says that his wife and children are away visiting her parents and what do I want? I explain I have escaped. Immediately he starts shivering.

"May I stay overnight?" I ask. "Just one night?"

"Ye-e-s," he croaks.

He goes over and pulls down the blinds. He keeps peeping out from behind them. He keeps walking up and down the house—he can't even sit down. I feel funny about it. Now that I am inside a house again, I am very hungry, but have not the courage to ask him for food, he is so scared as it is. He never goes to bed that night, he is so scared, but sits in a chair in the living-room all night. So I sit up, too, in a corner on the floor, looking at him and feeling sorry for him

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and trying to console him. "Don't be afraid, Dominik," I say. "I will stay only one night." But I cannot help thinking, "Why is a man so scared? A man should be some different person."

Between times of talking to Dominik I am half the time thinking what to do, half the time praying for help to do it, and all the time worrying about the priest and the priesthood student, whether they got across the border . . . then suddenly it comes to me, like a shock, that they must have been caught, and that that is how the police have found out about me. All through the rest of the night I picture them in the hands of the police, who are questioning them, "Who helped you? Who helped you?" and torturing the answer out of them.

Beyond the blinds I can finally see dawn come. It is the Sabbath, and I think, "This will be the first Sunday that I have ever missed Mass." I feel great loneliness. And especially because it is the Sunday of the period of 7-13 September when the people of Slovakia celebrate the birth of the Blessed Virgin, who was born on 8 September and christened on 12 September. On the Sunday in this period the people travel in great numbers to Mary shrines—there is much coming and going. "Mary," I think. It is my first name, as it is the first name given to all the sisters of our congregation, and we always use the initial. "I am Sister M. Cecilia," I think; and feel sad to be hiding on my other namesake's day.

But I feel better later in the morning when Veronika comes, thinking what bravery for her after what she has been through.

I ask Veronika to do something for me. I ask her to go to the hospital to see Sister Margita and ask her if I can go to

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her parents until I find another place. The parents live in a village twenty miles away, and I have visited there many times. Also I ask Veronika to ask Margita to send me something.

"Tell her to look under an old mattress in the hospital attic," I say. "She will find there my rosary and my Cross. Ask her to send them to me."

So Veronika goes. She is away three hours, and I am beginning to worry for her when the doorbell rings. Dominik starts shaking all over, then jumps behind the couch. I peep out of the window and see Veronika standing on the steps—and with her is Sister Margita! I open the door and Margita and I fall into each other's arms.

"You should not have come, Margita," I say, bringing them inside. "It is very dangerous. It's all right, Dominik," I say, and he climbs out from behind the couch, but is still shaking. "I only want you to let me go to your parents."

"Nesmysel," she says. "Nonsense. I'll take you."

We sit down and she tells me all about what happened after I left the hospital.

"When the police could not find you," Margita says, "they were almost beside themselves. They were furious at the idea that one sister could get away from all those police. And especially that you got away while they stupidly waited downstairs for you. So they sent for reinforcements. Soon large numbers of both uniformed and secret police arrived. Great platoons of police in their green uniforms and peaked caps and those dark belts with guns hanging from them. You would have thought that the war had started and the hospital was an enemy fortress they were trying to take. They stopped the whole hospital. Outside



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they surrounded it and inside they turned the hospital completely upside down."

Margita smiles, "I can understand why. Can you imagine the officer-in-charge of the party which came for you going back to his superior and reporting, 'Sir, about that sister. She got away.' "

We all three of us have to smile at the picture of that. Margita giggles.

"One sister getting away from all of them," Margita keeps saying. "Can you imagine? They were wild that their jaws had closed on nothing. They were like mad men, tormented devils, as they went over the hospital. I would have felt sorry for them had they not been Communists. They were so furious! The police went up and down shouting at each other. Every now and then a still higher-ranking officer would arrive, wearing shiny black boots, and he would start shouting at the one who had been in command until he arrived, 'You mean to stand there and tell me that one woman—a sister at that—got away from all these policemen? Don't play jokes on me!'

"And then that one would turn and go up and down the corridors shouting at *his* subordinates, 'Don't tell me that sister got away from all of you! Find her! She must be here! Find her!'

"And they would start turring the place upside down again. The whole place was in the worst turmoil. There must have been over fifty of them finally, crawling all over the hospital. They searched all the rooms.

"And their manners, I saw, such as not wanting to come up to a sister's room when they came for me, had at last deserted the police, and, I must admit, for some reason.

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"They pulled open all the drawers and opened all our suitcases, and they even got down on their hands and knees and crawled on the floor under the children's beds, under all three hundred beds in all four wings. The children were not disturbed at all, but thought it was a great party. Then the police took each sister, every single sister, aside into a room and questioned each one. Finally they lined up all the sisters and made them show their identification again."

"Seventy-four Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour lined up!" I exclaimed.

"All seventy-four," Margita says. "A regular formation. Oh, it was fun, seeing how furious the police were and how they had been fooled by one of us! Finally when they could think of nothing else, the officer who had been in charge of the original raiding party pointed to Jolana, who looks a little like you."

"I don't think she looks so much like me," I say.

"Well, that policeman thought so at that point. 'That's her!' he shouted. 'That's the one!' I suppose he wanted to capture one nun to take back, at that point any nun would do, so as not to go back without any nun at all. Mother Superior had to talk to him a long time to convince the officer that Sister Jolana was not Sister Cecilia. Oh, the commotion! They kept searching all night, and finally they left in the morning only when it was time to start the surgical operations, and then only after the director and the head specialist both signed a paper for the police certifying that Sister Cecilia was not now anywhere on these premises. What a night it was!"

"I am glad I missed it," I say.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," Margita says.

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"And then yesterday, Saturday," she goes on happily, "they kept the whole hospital surrounded. And all through the city every nun was stopped and made to show her identification card. On the streets, on the buses everywhere, every single nun was stopped. The whole city was alerted. To-day the police are relaxing a little and we are not being stopped. Anyhow, it is Mary's Sunday, and there are too many people travelling to stop and question everyone. You are extremely lucky and should be very thankful that Mary has her Sunday to-day."

"I am very thankful to her," I say.

Margita had been delayed getting here because she was not at the children's hospital when Veronika got there, having gone to visit my brother Edo at the hospital where he was sick with yellow fever, on the far-off chance that he might know where I was so that he could come to me. And my brother told Margita how the police had come to him, too, yesterday, trying to get him to tell where I was, which of course he didn't know.

"Mary's Sunday," Margita repeats. "This is the one thing that may permit you to get out to-day. But first . . ."

Then Margita gives me three things, my rosary, my Cross, and my prayer book, all of which I have had since becoming a nun. Taking them from her is like new strength coursing into my hands.

Veronika has also brought some things, though quite different from these: a new green silk dress of hers that is a much better dress than the blue polka-dot, which is worn, being a hand-me-down from the lady; a green kerchief for my head; some shoes with high heels; and some silk stockings.

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Always among the sisters I was the first who said if the Communists come and try to take off our nun's habits I will die first. Now I am the first to take them off and I feel great shame as I put on the green dress. And more when I put on the silk stockings, the first time in my whole life I ever have on silk stockings.

"*Velmi pekne!*" says Veronika. "Very nice!"

Now I try on the high heel shoes, like a lady wears, and as different as stilts from a nun's shoes with heels no higher than a man's. But when I start across the room in the high-heel shoes, I almost fall, and I know I cannot walk in them. So I leave them off.

Then Veronika reaches in her purse.

"Now the rouge and the lipstick," she says, "and the paint for the fingernails."

"No, no!" I say.

Margita and Veronika look at me.

"Why, you look bashful," Margita says.

"Now, come Sister," Veronika says.

"No," I say firmly. "What will Saint Joseph think?"

"Give Saint Joseph credit for a little sense," says Sister Margita. "Saint Joseph will understand it if you wear the rouge and lipstick and fingernail paint, or he is not the saint I know he is."

"No," I say very firmly. "I will not do it."

"But they will help more than anything to hide you," Sister Margita pleads with me. "In rouge, lipstick, and fingernail paint, no one will ever guess that you are a nun."

But the red painting I will never consent to, even if the Communists should get me because of leaving it off, and they finally give up their hard arguments.

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Then Margita says, "God has given us this day for you to leave. A day when many people are travelling and it will be much safer for you. We must use what God has given us. You must leave tonight."

"I am happy to do that," I say, thinking of Dominik.

Then Margita gives me the plan: She will be at the station at eight, after dark. I am not to show any recognition of her because of her nun's clothes, but to follow her at a distance.

Then they leave, and until dark I stay in Dominik's house, the Sabbath long. I had taught his children, but he is very happy to see me leave, a great smile showering his face.

"*Mnoho stastia*," he says at the door, with an enormous smile, which means, as the Slovaks say in farewell, "Much luck."

"*Pan Boh zaplath a pozehnaj vas*," I say, as one of religion in Slovakia says good-bye. "Sir, God reward you and bless you."

And going away, I pray God that Dominik will not spill hot soup on a customer the next day from the shock of me.

And so I take the way to the village home of Margita's parents. The station is truly crowded with all the people from Mary's Sunday. In the station I follow Sister Margita at a distance and on to the train, which is so crowded that many are standing, though I manage to get a seat. I follow her when we get off and until, in the darkness, we approach her house.

I am looking forward, at Margita's parents, to sleeping all night in a house where the people will want me, for I am very tired after Dominik. But when we come into the yard,

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we can see the house all lighted up and hear, from inside, the happy noises of a feast. We stop.

"Oh, Cecilia, I forgot!" Margita says as if it is her fault. "They are having *hody*, for the anniversary of the church here."

*Hody* is a big celebration where everyone dresses in costume and the people come from many miles, including all your relatives who can get there, to go to church and then to feast and have wine and even beer if you are rich, and the young to dance far into the night and the old to sit around and talk about the *hody* they had when they were young.

"I'd better go inside first," Margita says.

She goes and comes back and says the house is full of her relatives, many of whom will stay the night. It is chilly outside, and though I long to go inside, and especially seeing all the lights and hearing the happy sounds of the religious feast, I know I must not. For I know many of the relatives, and they would wonder why I am in lay clothes. Margita has brought blankets from the house, and, from the feast, a big stack of *kolache* pastry. I tell her to go inside.

"*Nesmysel*," she says. "This is the first chance I have had since I became a sister to sleep here, like when I was a little girl, and you are not going to cheat me out of it."

So she must stay with me in the barn. So we climb up in the hayloft over the cows. We lie under the blankets and eat *kolache*, which is my first food in over two days, stuffing ourselves like two little girls. I would probably have been sick, but that I have always had a good stomach, which is one of the most helpful of all things to have when one is in hiding from the Communists. And we lie talking and laugh-

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ing over stories that we tell each other, so that actually I forget for a while that I am in hiding. Then we kneel in the hay and pray before we fall asleep. I sleep very heavily, with all the *kolache* in me and the wonderful fresh air of the country and no police, nobody, just the cows. The last happy time I am to know for a long time.

Next morning the relatives have gone, and we go inside. Margita's parents wish to keep me, but it is not too safe there. For one thing, they have a Communist neighbour. Then, the children know me as a nun and would talk. Already one, Margita's nephew who is staying there, pulls at my dress.

"Sister, where are your clothes like my auntie has?"

"I know, little one," I say, and am sad, "you never saw me in clothes like this before."

He gets bashful then and walks away. He is four years old.

So we sit, the parents, Margita and I, and plan what is the best thing to do. Then Margita's younger sister is called.

This is Anicka. That I am alive to-day I owe to Anicka more than to any other living person.

Anicka is a very pretty girl of twenty with hair like the ripening wheat and tiny. About eight stone and five feet two inches, and every ounce of her courage. She hates the Communists with a fierce hate. In the next month she is to risk her life over and over finding places for me. She is fiery, with blue eyes like the clear part of the flame when she gets angry, such as now when she comes in and is told about me. She is almost more angry than I am at the way I have to hide.

"To drive one from one's home," she says. "It is an awful thing."

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She is a very feminine girl usually, but now she calls the Communists names which I, being a nun, would never say. But nothing is to keep a nun's ears from hearing them.

Then she calms herself down.

"But we cannot fight them with angry words," she says. "We must fight them by being more clever than they are."

So now Anicka goes for the first time to find me a place.

The place is the same small town where Father Matej had hid out when he wrote to me. It is ten miles away, and Anicka leaves for there, walking.

Meantime I spend the day going to a town nearby, the town of X, the same where I went to school to the nuns, and have my photograph taken in civilian clothes for a false identification, which later a member of the underground brings me.

"Look in the mirror—make yourself look pretty now," the photographer says.

"I don't care how I look," I say. "Just take it."

In order to get the picture the same day, I have to tell the photographer a lie, which is that I have three children whom I support and have a chance to get a job to-day in a factory, but need the identification card for it, and it must be to-day or the job will be gone. It is very hard to do this lying, which I had to do a great deal of during my hiding, one of the hardest things of all. The photographer sympathizes with me and gets the picture ready.

When I look at the picture of me in the civilian clothes, I am very unhappy again. It looks like someone I never knew. It is—it is Terezia Horská, my new name. It does not look like Sister Cecilia, which I am not now.



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"How do you like it?" the photographer says, beaming. "It is pretty, isn't it?"

"It is pretty," I have to lie again.

After the picture I come back to Margita's house. About dusk Anicka returns. She is dusty from the road, but she has an answer from the people where she has gone. The answer is, Hurry on.

I say good-bye to Margita and tell her how it hurts to leave her. Then I say good-bye to Anicka and ask her to try to find out one thing for me—what happened to the priest and the priesthood student I was helping across the border when the police came for me. After dark I start out alone, carrying my bag over my shoulder, in it a change of underwear Anicka has given me and my rosary, my Cross, and my prayer book. • •

I keep to the side of the lonely gravel road for all the ten miles. I was used to going with sisters when I went out and hardly ever went by myself, and it seems strange and unreal to be walking alone. But I am cheered by the thought of where I am going. I have heard many good things of these people from Father Matcj, who stayed there after he escaped Muceniky Prison and whom they had told, "If you have anyone to hide, send them here." I think that I will stay there for six or seven months, by which time I think the Communist rule of my country will be at an end. Oh, the foolish optimism we felt, and especially me on that dark night!

I arrive about midnight. When I ring the bell outside the fence, a huge dog leaps forward. It scares me very much, but later I was to feel like a close friend towards that dog. Then, quickly, the door to the house opens and the dog goes leaping inside.

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Then I see a very tiny figure, a wraith of a woman wearing a kerchief around her head, coming towards me through the darkness. I say who I am. Then the gate comes open and I hear one of the sweetest voices I have ever heard, old and thin, but sweet as the sound of the *skovranok* in the fields, speak to me through the dark night.

"Welcome, Sister," the voice says. "Welcome to your new home."

## I I

### THE TWO UNDERGROUND SAINTS

THE house I have come to is the house of Rosa, who is about seventy years old. She has a sister, Julka, who is even older. They each weigh about seven stone. They are both widows, are grey-haired and sickly, and live on what their husbands left them plus embroidery they do. They devote their lives to hiding people out, Father Matej and many others and now me.

Rosa and Julka are two of the most cool-headed and fearless persons I ever knew, of any age. They know, I think, that the police will one day get them. Rosa smiles when I tell her that.

"They take the last few years of my life," she says, "and so what? By this I buy dozens of years of life for other people."

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She bought hundreds of years.

These two tiny old ladies have worked out a clever system for hiding people. They have this wolf-dog named Gastan, which is to say "Chestnut", the same who greeted me when I arrived. Gastan is the size of a Shetland pony and has the temperament of a fasting tiger. He runs free in the fenced yard. The bell to the house is of necessity on the outside of the gate. If any visitor rings the bell, Gastan sets up a roar like something out of the jungle of Africa and goes bounding over the yard scaring the visitor half out of his wits. Then one or the other of the little old sisters goes to the door and speaks gently out to the visitor: "Just a minute, if you please, while I put Gastan away." Then they open the door and this huge monster of an animal bounds into the house, and the sisters lock him in the kitchen like a cage. Then they let the visitor in.

All of this gains at least five minutes and gives us all plenty of time to put me in the hideout. This hideout is a very tiny room with a bathtub in it which just about fills the entire room. When Gastan starts barking, informing us that someone is at the gate, I go into this room and sit down in the bathtub, that being the only place to sit. Then the sisters close the door, which is a specially built door with no knob which they have made which looks just like the wall and fits flush into it. Then in front of the door the two sisters between them pull and push an enormous clothes cupboard which covers it completely.

It is an excellent hideout which these two little old ladies have devised.

I use this hideout whenever anyone comes, even friends of the old ladies, for it is not to be known by anyone that

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I am in that house. In the manner of old ladies they have a number of visitors about their own age who have nothing more to do but pass the time with them. So I spend many an hour in the bathtub. So many that I start keeping sewing and my prayer book in the hideout to give me something to do in the bathtub. The sewing is some of the old ladies' embroidery, with which I help to pay my way a little bit, and also I have liked doing embroidery from the time I was a child.

Despite the hours in the bathtub, this house is in many ways the most pleasant place I stayed in during all my hiding. It is a pretty house in a quiet village with many trees, and it is full of good smells.

I remember that house by the smells in it, the good smells.

There is the smell of the long flower garden which runs the whole length of the house to one side of it and the smell of the fruit trees from through the porch, the peach trees and the pear and the apple. There is the smell of the fields which stretch out behind the house. From inside there is the smell of the grapes when we squeeze them to make wine. Most of all there is the good, good smell of the autumn preserving which Rosa, Julka, and I do day after day in the kitchen, putting up peaches and prune preserves and beans and apples and a wonderful-smelling mixture of cabbage, peppers, and cucumbers which we make according to a recipe of Rosa's.

It seems little like I had imagined a house of the underground to be.

Doing this preserving all day long, the centuries-old work of women in autumn in Slovakia, almost makes me happy

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again. Almost it makes me forget that somewhere beyond that house are Communists looking for me. As we work, the two old ladies talk fondly of the time their husbands, who had both been Government officials under the First Republic before they died many years ago, were alive and of what the husbands' favourites had been among the many good preserves we made. It is a happy time, fragrant with so many things that are good and right in this world. For a while it brings a kind of peace over my soul that shields out the long season of hiding.

In the day I stay always in the house, but twice late at night I slip out into the garden and stand breathing the fresh air and smelling the chrysanthemums which, this being autumn, are the only flowers in bloom, and looking up into the sky and having a kind of talking with the stars.

But by day I always stay in. And this leads to a time, one day when I have not been there long, when Rosa looks at me and laughs.

"Sister, that forehead of yours," she says. "We'll have to do something about it."

"What's wrong with my forehead?" I say.

"Nothing really wrong with it, Sister," she says. "Only that the rest of your face is tan and rosy while your forehead . . ."

She looks at me and smiles widely, and her little old eyes twinkle.

". . . your forehead is . . . well, it's the forehead of a sister."

I give a cry of sudden realization, and my hand goes to my forehead. It had never occurred to me. For twenty years my forehead has been covered by my nun's bonnet. My face

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is the colour of the weather and the sun. My forehead is marble white.

"Anyone would know from your white forehead that you are a nun," Rosa says aloud what I am thinking. "Quicker than if they saw you with your large nun's rosary."

"But I can't go out in the day and let the sun dye it," I say.

"Here," she says. "Come with me."

She leads me to a place in the hall where the sun comes through in the morning, just a tiny square of it, and that only if you sit just so.

"Sit down here," she says.

She gets me some paper to cover up the rest of my face. For an hour each morning after that I sit in the one exact spot in the hall, cover up my face with paper, and let the sun give its hue to my forehead.

After a week of this, Rosa is satisfied.

"Now you no longer have a nun's forehead," she says.

Rosa and Julka are a strange mixture of absolute courage in doing anything for you and an almost complete timidity in asking you to do anything, however slight, for them.

I sleep beneath the Cross on a dark green couch in the living-room that unfolds at night to make a bed. The Cross, above the couch, is about a yard high, made of wood with a plaster Jesus hanging from it in crucifixion. After I have been in their house a while, the two sisters start telling me how Father Matej, when he stayed with them, used to celebrate a Mass secretly for them every day beneath this Cross, and also how he would say the rosary at night. They mention half-a-dozen times how Father Matej did that and wasn't that nice? I agree, but am perplexed as to why they keep mentioning it. They go all around the barn until finally

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one day they lead up to a question, which Julka puts very timidly to me.

"Sister," she says, "you cannot celebrate Mass but . . . could you say the rosary with us?"

I smile broadly at them and squeeze each of their hands. "There is nothing I would like better."

So every night after that we pull the blinds down and turn out the lights. Then we light a small candle which stands on a shelf under the Cross. Then the three of us kneel and pray, the sisters on either side of me, and look up at the candle, like the sanctuary lamp in a church.

After praying, we often listen to Radio Free Europe. The Communists persecute you if you are caught doing such listening. But Rosa and Julka have worked out a safeguard against this too. Rosa gets an oversized blanket, and we sit in the middle of the room and cover the radio and ourselves with the blanket and huddle under it, so the sound won't go far, listening to it to encourage ourselves and keep our spirits up.

So it is that many of our nights come to be passed by the glow of two secret lights, small but full of promise—the light of the candle under the Cross and the light of the radio of freedom under the blanket.

So we have things to sustain us. Mostly we have God, for it is as people in my country had started saying under the Communist rule: "*Kde je nudza najvacsia pomoc Bozia najblizsia.*" (When the misery is the biggest, the help of God is the closest.)"

Then there is something else which cheers me greatly—visits from Anicka. She always brings things. She brings poppy seed and sugar and eggs and soap. And best of all,

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on her first visit, she brings news about the priest and the seminarian I was smuggling across the border when the police came for me.

"I saw Zofia," she says, "and she told me to tell you they got across. They are in the U.S. zone of Austria."

I close my eyes a moment and think, "Thank God. Thank God very much."

Next best of all Anicka brings news from my two families—my family of this world and my religious family.

"I went over to the hospital in Bratislava yesterday," Anicka tells me during her first visit, "and the sisters were asking how you were. They send their love. They said Mother Superior has had to go to the police station four times to be questioned about you. Mother Superior herself! And here's a letter from Margita."

I tear it open. For pages she tells how everything is in the hospital. Then she adds: *And would you guess what? The place where you used to kneel in the hospital chapel is left empty, and no one kneels there any more. So that we will be reminded of you. Also, no one lights candles in front of Saint Joseph any more, and I think he must miss you, too, though I can't understand why, since you were always asking him for something. Do you remember how, every time we saw a candle burning in front of Saint Joseph, we would say, "Well, I see Sister Cecilia is asking for something else."*

I smile. Sweet, cheerful Margita.

The second week I am there, Anicka brings me another letter from Margita which has more than just cheer in it. We sit in the living-room, Rosa, Julka, Anicka, and I, while I open it and read it aloud.

*You remember Zofia? (Margita writes) Well, she came to the*



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*hospital to-day with some news. It seems that her father was talking to her, and he said he would take "Sister"—you naturally—across the border. Free! No charge, no 15,000 crowns, no money at all. I guess they like you. All you have to do, Zofia's father says, is "pack your bag and come over any time you want."*

I am truly astonished by this, for Zofia and her father are not in this smuggling business for love. I am astonished, and touched really.

*But you must decide quickly (Margita writes) because Zofia's father says he has permission to go to the Morava hayfield only once more this autumn, and he would have to take you then. Dearest sister—I hate the thought of you leaving the country. It makes me sick even to think of it. But I would hate even more to see you in the hands of those you very nicely didn't get into the hands of when so many of them came for you. Think it over and pray about it—do both—and so will I. But you must send the answer back by Anicka for Zofia and her father cannot wait.*

I look up. Three pairs of eyes, two pairs very old and one pair young, are watching me intently. For a long time no one says anything.

"Well," I say then, "that is some invitation. I never got an invitation like that before."

Still no one speaks. "Wasn't that nice of Zofia and her father?" I say.

"Don't go, Sister," Rosa speaks up suddenly, and stronger than I have ever heard her. "You are all right here. No one is bothering you. And, well . . . we want to keep you as long as we can."

"Auntie," Anicka says quietly, "forgive me. But I think Sister should go."

"Anicka, dear," Rosa says, "this business of the Com-

munists isn't going to last for ever—it just can't. It seems so foolish for Sister to take the chance of crossing the border when the Communists might be out of power any time. Think of what happened to all those priests who were with Father Matej and got caught. If Sister were caught . . .”

“But the Communists *aren't* going to be out!” Anicka exclaims, with sudden anger. “Forgive me, Auntie, but we've all got to stop fooling ourselves on that. We keep saying it over and over like a child making dreams. ‘The Communists are going to be out tomorrow.’ Like a child closing his eyes so he won't see the bogeyman. This day-dreaming! Who's going to put them out? Tell me that. Tell me, someone!”

I am used to Anicka being fervent, but I have never seen her like this. Her eyes are flashing, and her blonde hair is tossing as she speaks. It seems strange, but anger makes her more beautiful, if anything, and she is beautiful enough anyhow to make you catch your breath.

“Anicka,” I say, “you are too alarmed. I think Rosa is right. The Communists just couldn't be in power long. There are too many people that hate them.”

“Sister, listen to me,” Anicka says. She sighs a long sigh. “Hate doesn't drive the Communists out. If hate would kill the Communists, they would all have been dust long ago. That's what we've all been thinking, me too, that if we hate enough, poof! the Communists will just disappear. Ah, it will take much more than hatred. I don't know what it will take, but it will take much more than that. You say that they will soon be out,” she says, her eyes flashing around at all three of us. “How foolish! Every day they get stronger. Every day more and more of their enemies, more

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and more of those who hate them, go to jail, until soon there will be no one left outside but Communists—and those who bow down in front of Communists. It is a dream, a foolish daydream, to think they will suddenly be out!”

How frighteningly wise, I think now, as well as brave, that young girl turned out to be. But I could not see it then. She leans forward from her chair, her blue eyes burning like the clear part of the flame, as they did when she was convinced of something.

“Sister, listen to me. When you have a chance like this, you must take it. It may be years before you get another such chance. It isn’t safe for you in this country. I tell you, I am on the outside and I know. You are locked in here and you just can’t possibly know how things are changing, every day they’re changing. Every day they get bolder. Every day the papers are full of more stories of people caught at the border, of the sentences they get, what happens to them, all the details of it to scare the others off.”

“The more reason to stay,” Rosa says, “if people who try to cross are getting caught like that.”

“Can’t you see, Auntie, Sister,” Anicka cries, “Soon it will be impossible to get out at all? Sister, you can’t just pick your time like . . . like an excursion trip down the Danube. The time will come when you want to go and you find out you can’t. It will never be less dangerous than it is to-day. Sister, you must go! You’ve got to go—now!”

I look at her a long time. I sigh deeply. But it is all too fast for me. Everything is too fast for me. It is much too soon even to think of going. It has been less than three weeks since I fled. I am settled comfortably in this house with two old ladies I have come quickly to love. If I can’t

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be in a convent, there is no place I would rather be. Suddenly to pick up and try to leave our land and make the dangerous journey across the border into a strange country . . . it is unthinkable.'

"No, Anicka," I say. "I will stay. This is my country. It is not theirs. They will not drive me out of it. If someone has to go, let *them* go."

Anicka sighs and presses her lips together. "All right, Sister. It is a very big mistake. But no one can keep us from making our own mistakes. Ah, but Sister, you are so stubborn!"

Then abruptly, she smiles. "But I will stick with you—and your stubbornness."

It seems so strange, looking back on it now. At that time I could not even bring myself to cross the border. "What am I going to do if I do get to Austria"—I think, "just sit there by myself?" Even when I did bring myself to cross it, I always thought I would go just over the border, settle down somewhere near it, and as soon as things turned over in my country, go right back the next day. Now I am seven thousand miles away in a place called Oakland, California, which I had never even heard of when finally I did cross over the border.

Then and there I write a note to Zofia for Anicka to take back. It is the first and only thank-you note I have ever written declining an invitation to be smuggled across the border.

*Thank you very much, you and your father, for the invitation. (I write.) That you want to take that chance for me moves me. But I am not prepared on my own part for something like that yet. Later, perhaps, I will be. For something as big as that, one must*

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*be prepared not only in the body but in the soul as well. For that one has to have plenty of courage, and just now I have neither the preparation nor the courage. But I thank you from deep in me for your kindness. Always thinking of you in my prayers.*

Anicka leaves with the letter. We pass the next few days finishing the canning, but now it is not quite as peaceful. My mind is disturbed and continues to ask, "Was Anicka really right? She is such a clever girl. Maybe she was right, and I should have gone."

And I lie awake at night, wondering if I have made the right decision.

Then the preserving is over, and I go back to my sewing. The days seem much slower now, with so much of my daily routine gone. It is three weeks that I have been at Rosa and Julka's, and it is a very quiet day when Gastan starts barking. Rosa peeps out of the window.

"Hide, Sister, hide!" she says, and by the way she says it, I know it is not just another of her lady friends coming calling. I run fast into the little hideout room and sit in the bathtub. The two sisters shut the door over me and then the cupboard. After a while I can hear Gastan leaping into the house and the kitchen door close behind him.

Then I hear the feet of many men. Tramping, clomping, all around the house, upstairs and down. It is seven police, as it turns out.

After a while I hear them open the door of the cupboard which is over the door to the hideout. I hear them rustling through the clothes. In the bathtub I hold my breath and pray to Saint Joseph.

Then I hear voices raised.

Then all is silent.

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It is a while before I hear the cupboard being pulled away. It sounds as if Rosa and Julka are having great trouble pulling it away. Then it is away enough for me to get out, and I see why: Only Rósa is there to pull and push it.

"Where is Julka?" I say, hollow and trembling inside me, for I think I already know.

"They took Julka," Rosa says quietly. "Sestricka." This little old lady looks up at me. "Why didn't they take me instead?"

Then she is all business again, very quickly. "Sister, it will be very dangerous for you here now. We must take you somewhere else."

So that night we take a path through the fields four miles to another sister of Rosa's and Julka's in the country. It is a long walk for such an old lady, but Rosa insists she must go with me. We hardly say a word. Every step of those miles I wish I could say something that would ease what is on Rosa's mind, but which she keeps bravely to herself, though I feel her tenseness, almost shaking beside me, and every now and then hear her take a deep breath. Only once she says, "They said they would have to take Julka for questioning. They promised if she would tell everything she knew, she would be back soon. If she didn't . . . well, Sister, she will never tell. Julka will never tell. You may be sure of that."

Then we are at the other sister's house.

"Rosa," I say just before we go in, "Julka . . . if it hadn't been for me, and people like me . . ."

And Rosa touches my cheek, so gently, and she tells me, "Do not cry, Sestricka. To be taken in God's work—where lives more glory than that?"

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Later I hear that Julka never came back, and that since then, they took Rosa also. No one would ever have gone more bravely. May Our Holy Saviour comfort these two old ladies with His best comfort if they are alive in prison and place upon them many crowns if they are in heaven above. Rosa and Julka—they are already to me among the company of the blessed saints.

## I 2

### SKI TROUSERS AND ZEBRA SWEATER

WHEN Rosa tells her other sister what has happened to Julka, the sister sways on her feet, and I think she will faint. We sit in the living-room talking, the three of us, until the shock of it is over, or at least the worst of it.

"Sister, you must not stay even here long," Rosa says to me before leaving. "The police are alerted now and anywhere around here is bad for you. You must get another place quickly, though probably it will be better for you to stay here a couple of days or so until things are a little quieter and you can travel better. I will get word to Anicka."

I go to a straw pallet in this other sister's attic and stay there, not leaving once. Late next day, Anicka comes. She comes up into the attic, and we fall into each other's arms.

"What a place for you to be, Sister," she says, looking

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around the attic. "But it was wise to come here quickly. Rosa is a very wise woman."

"About Julka," I say, ". . . it is terrible."

"I know, Sister," Anicka says. "But that is the price of all this. Julka would be the first to agree to that. But now we must think about you."

And Anicka takes charge again. She is very calm, and she has a lot of initiative. God gives persons like Anicka brains and courage and makes them clever for everything because they are badly needed.

"I will go and see a friend of mine," Anicka says, and names a town some distance away.

"He is a priest. He will have an idea. Maybe you can go there. I will be back in two days."

She goes that same night the thirty miles to the town. Two days later she is back and comes again to me in the attic.

"Good news!" she says. "I told the priest all about you, and he has found you a place to stay for three weeks. And this will please you—it is with a teacher like yourself. A kindergarten teacher."

By the time the three weeks are up, Anicka tells me, she will have found another place for me.

"The main thing now," she says, "is to keep you moving around, not to stay long in any one place, not long enough to put them on your trail."

That same night I take the train to the town. Always at night I go, like an animal, not like a human being. From where I sit on the hard wooden bench the train seems to tremble under my feet, but the trembling must be in me. I feel I am going into empty space. At Rosa's I had been



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starting to be almost happy, even in hiding. Now all the fear is rushing up in me again, and everything seems sorrowful in front of me. Even the people in the train look as if they are feeling sorrowful about something. It is true that we see in others our own feelings.

There is one thing only to cheer me. Before Anicka had gone to find me this new place I asked her to arrange something that I know I must have if I am to go farther.

For twenty-three years I have gone to church every day. But now I have not been at all since I left the hospital, and it is a full month. I know that I cannot go on unless I go to church once and have Holy Communion. So I arrange beforehand, through Anicka in case her priest friend should find a place for me, to take Holy Communion from him the first night after I arrive. The day long I eat nothing, to prepare myself.

The wife of the teacher with whom I am staying, her name is Marta, gets the key to the church for me from the priest. And after dark I go and unlock the side door of the church—and go in, all alone.

It is all black in the church except for the sanctuary light on the altar. I stand and let the holy place move over me. Then I go to the front of the altar. At first I can barely see anything in the shadows. Then I look up, and on the wall of the side of the altar I slowly make out a large painting. It is exactly the same as the little picture I am carrying from the hospital and have carried with me since I made the first promise to be a nun—of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

I fall on my knees in front of the altar, and suddenly I am sobbing and shaking all over, I cannot help it, for I feel so

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alone in the world, and what have I done to be so alone and forsaken?

"God, my God," I cry out, "how much sorrow must I bear? Come to me, come take away my loneliness."

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

I look up, and it is the priest.

"Sister," he says, and the word tells me he understands. "Sister."

And in the dark church I make my confession and he gives me Holy Communion.

Before he leaves, I say. "Father, I would like to light a candle." He gets me one. Then he says, with much gentleness. "Sestricka, don't put the electric lights on, lest people get suspicious at the lights being on at night in the church."

"No, Father, I won't do that," I say. And he leaves, and all alone in the church I light the candle.

Then I kneel again and look up at the painting and I pray.

"Holy Saviour," I pray, "thank you for saving me this far. I hope you save me further from the hands of the Communists. Give me strength, O Holy Saviour! And make me feel not so forsaken. Not so alone! Even if it's night, I'm grateful you made this possible for me, to be in your church again and have Holy Communion. Thank you, Jesus, you are kind to me."

I stay on my knees perhaps half-an-hour and would like to stay all night, but that I promised the teacher to come back. So I go out and lock the church door. It is cloudy and October, and I feel the breath of the coming cold. But I feel full of peace now, and that I can make it for a while longer on my journey.

The home of Marta and her husband is the first place I am

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in the open, for they have no hideout to put me in, such as at Rosa's and Julka's. So I pretend, by the arrangement, to be Marta's sister-in-law visiting her.

It is this that makes it one of the worst places for me that I stayed in during all my hiding because I have to lie so much when women come to call on Marta and ask many gossiping questions, as in any village. Especially it is bad to lie that I am married.

But I invent a husband. And while I am doing this invention, I invent a family. Marta's lady friends come calling, and it is a regular questioning session.

"What does your husband do?"

"He works on the railway."

"Oh, that must be hard work."

"Well, it is," I say. "He makes good money, but it's very hard work—working outside all the time, you know, on the section gang. He's out in all sorts of weather."

"Well, the trains have to keep running, I suppose. And how is it you can stay such a long time away from him?"

"Well, you see, I have a sickness," I pretend to be a little sick just then. "I am here with Marta to try to recover a little from it."

"Oh, what a shame, what a shame," they cackle. "What kind of sickness, dear?"

"Kidney trouble."

"Oh, kidney trouble? Oh, that can be bad . . . how did you get the kidney trouble?"

"Well, you see, my husband was working some distance from our home, working on the rails. It was such a long time he was away that I went to see him and to stay with him a while. We stayed in a sort of hut not too far from

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where he was working. It was very cold there—this was in the winter, you see. And I got a bad cold of some kind in my kidney. And that is the way I got kidney trouble.”

They all shake their heads sympathetically. “Ah, what a shame, what a shame.” They all sway their heads in unison. “You poor dear. Ah, ah. We feel so sorry for you.”

“Kidneys are an awful sickness,” one says. She looks at me me suspiciously. “You look pretty healthy. Such rosy cheeks.”

“Also I have high blood pressure,” I put in. “That is the reason why my cheeks are so rosy.”

And I try to look very, very unhealthy.

“But that is the way of life,” I say. “One must go where one’s husband goes.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” they chorus.

Then one says, “And your children?”

This part is not so hard. Because I pick out some of my former kindergarten children and imagine they are mine, that I am their mother. This is not hard at all for me to do.

Also, in preparation for these questions, I am knitting little stockings as I talk or sometimes making some little shoes such as I used to make for my kindergarten children at the time of Saint Nicholas, for Saint Nicholas to put sweets in when he comes.

“How many children have you?”

“Three,” I say.

“What kind?”

“Two little girls and a little boy.”

I pick out three specific ones from my former kindergarten classes who were especially nice and give their names and their ages.

"Viera, she is five, has pretty blonde hair," I say. "She looks like her father. Kristina, she is eight—she has dark hair, she is like me. Stefan, he is nine—he is more like my mother. He is my mother's favourite because he looks like her—and because he was the first."

"Ah, isn't that just the way grandmothers are!" the women say. "They always favour the first one!"

"My mother is taking care of my children while I am here," I say, and sigh. "How I miss my pretty children!"

And this part is the truth. I am almost getting to believe it myself, that I have these three children named Stefan, Viera, and Kristina.

"Ah, ah, it is so bad," the ladies cackle in chorus, "to be away from one's children."

"You have no idea," I say.

Marta is always there with me when I am talking with the women, and when she goes out, locks the door so they won't get me by myself and ask too many questions. But one day when Marta is out, I hear a knock on the door. I don't answer it, not feeling like talking with any more of the women that day. I go to a side room and sit very quietly waiting for whoever it is to go away. Then suddenly I am startled to see an old lady's face pressed against the window. It looks very angry.

"You stupid goose!" she shouts at me. "Why don't you open the door when I knock on it? Why do you leave an old person standing in the yard?"

"I haven't got the key!" I yell out. "Marta locked the door and took the key with her!"

"Why don't you open your mouth and say you haven't a

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key, you stupid goose!" the old lady says. She is very angry. "You leave me out here to freeze."

Then she holds up something. "I have a basket for Marta and her husband!" she yells through the closed window. "From the butchering!"

In Slovakia, at the time of butchering, it is the custom to take one basket of the meat to the priest and one to the teacher.

"Never mind!" the old lady shouts angrily, turning away from the window. "I will come back!"

In five minutes Marta comes in, and she has the basket with her. She had met the old lady going away.

"She was like a little old ball of fire," Marta says. We both have to laugh over it. "I had to do a lot of explaining to convince her I had forgotten and locked the door, like I do when nobody is here, and taken the key with me."

If she had been a young person, she probably would have been suspicious about the locked house, and anyhow she was too angry to be suspicious.

Marta's husband is a quiet, sickly, good man. His being a kindergarten teacher—in a Government school, which all the schools are now—gives us a lot to talk about and otherwise fills my time. For I start painting some pictures for Marta's husband to take to his children. I draw things for the coming Christmas—Christmas trees, and candles and apples, all for the children to paint. Then I paint lilies myself and cut them out and paste on them the names of the children which Marta's husband gives me. It is a good feeling to be doing some things for children again, even if I never see the ones my drawings go to.

I never see the children—but I hear them. For the school

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is right next door to the teacher's house. And one day I make a discovery.

I discover that by standing next to the wall of the house that is on the same side as the school and putting my ear up against it, I can just faintly hear the children. I can hear a little better even by holding a water glass with one end against the wall and the other against my ear, like an ear trumpet. I hear their little noises. I hear them singing. I hear them playing during break, hear their little shouts filling the air. Tears fill my eyes as I listen once again to the small voices. I keep listening for prayers, but these I never hear.

Listening to their singing and their playing actually encourages me in a way, as the sounds of children always do. But in another way it makes me greatly sorrowful. For I feel I should be there with them.

With my ear there against the wall listening to the children's sounds, I sometimes get bitter, for the first time since I left my own kindergarten, Saint Joseph forgive me this bitterness. But I cannot help thinking, "I have seventeen years of experience with children, and now all that is thrown away.

And I feel as though they have taken my brains, and whatever is there that I know about children, and mixed them all up with a spoon and thrown them into a sewer.

Then I force myself to chase these thoughts away. For one thing, they are not pretty thoughts. For another, I do not have time for feelings, to let my thoughts and my energy be drained out of me by any such feelings. I know, if I am to stay alive and not be captured, that I must keep myself prepared and ready for every step of the way that might suddenly present itself.

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Bitterness must be the most unrewarding of all feelings that can come over a human being. I tell myself this in chasing my own away. Then I can see it too in Marta. Hers has nothing to do with the Communists. What it has to do with I never entirely find out, and I'm not sure she knows either. But talking with her about it and trying to do a little something about it also occupies some of my time.

"You know, Sister," she tells me "my trouble is that I really don't have any strong feelings about anything. I didn't even cry when my mother died."

Marta and her husband cannot have children. If they could have, I would have prescribed the remedy I always prescribe for those who felt about life as she did, which was to have some. So I prescribe the next best thing I always prescribe.

"Marta, why don't you adopt a child from the orphanage?"

"What am I going to do with it if I don't like it?" Marta says.

"Why, that's simple," I say. "Take one you like."

"But I don't know if I'm going to like it when I get it home," she says. "Then it's too late to change."

"You will like it," I say.

"And if the child doesn't listen to me, what then?"

"Children are kind," I say. "If you are kind to the child, the child will be kind to you."

"I'm getting so nervous," Marta says, "that if the child would throw toys around the house or make noises, I might chase it right out."

"If you want to have something, Marta," I say, more firmly, "you've got to take what comes."



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She is always putting obstacles in front of her like that. And yet she wants to do something.

"Sister," she says. "I was really happy when the priest came to me and said I must help you hide. It gave me something in life. Sister, I want to tell you that I am so happy to have you here—but even that is for a selfish reason, you see."

I put my arm around her. "Marta, there is nothing selfish about your keeping me. But you should get a child," I add.

Sometimes we have these talks while we walk in the fields at night behind the house to give me some fresh air and exercise. Usually, though, I take the long walks at night in the fields by myself—I never go out in the day for fear I may be asked for my identification card, even though I have a false one. Sometimes in the fields, where always I feel closest to God, I kneel and say my rosary.

Then the three weeks are gone, and one day Anicka is there again.

"It is time for you to move on, Sister," she says.

She has found another place for me, but it is farther away than anything before.

"This whole part of the country around here," Anicka says, meaning western Slovakia, "is unsafe now, because it is nearer to the border. And even now there are heavy concentrations of the National Security Police in all the border area. So I have found you a place away in eastern Slovakia."

I feel miserable about going so far, to a part of the country I have never been in. But I feel a little better when Anicka says, "I will go with you—at least for most of the way."

Then she reaches into her bag. "New country means

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new clothes, Sister! Now you must wear the national costume of the region where you are going. Look!"

She spreads out on the bed a beautiful green skirt pleated behind and with a navy-blue apron in front and all around it a lovely embroidered fringe. Then she lays out a cream blouse of fine material. And a white kerchief.

"Try them on, Sister! I must see you in them."

So I do, and Anicka walks all around me.

"How pretty you look!"

I pretend that I like them very much. They are highly pretty indeed—but really I have no heart for them and long for my religious habit.

"Now, Sister," Anicka says, reaching in her bag again, "I have here something a little different."

So she pulls out two other items of clothing. These truly amaze me.

One item is a pair of ski trousers, including elastic on the bottom to keep the snow out. The other is a black-and-white sweater—with zebra stripes!

"Saint Joseph above!" I say.

"At your new home," Anicka says, "you will be doing some work in the harvest fields, for further purposes of obscuring you."

I am very glad to hear this, for I am tired of being cooped up in a house and to be in the fields will be wonderful.

"But do I have to wear these trousers?" I say. "And the sweater with these African animal stripes?"

"Sister, you can't wear a dress and work in the fields. Besides, the African animal sweater, as you call it, cost three thousand crowns."

"Three thousand crowns!" I say without belief.

### *Ski Trousers and Zebra Sweater*

"And what's more, it's from the sisters at the hospital. Margita and some of the others took up a collection for it."

"Margita?" I say, truly astonished. "Sister Margita picked that out for me?"

"Not exactly picked it out," Anicka says, and laughs. "She got someone to go and buy you a sweater on the black market—and that someone came back with the zebra stripes. Margita said she wished she could see you in it. Now try them on!"

So I try on the zebra sweater and the ski trousers.

Anicka stands back and looks at me. Suddenly she laughs.

"Sister, you look just like a comrade-woman."

## I 3

### A PAIR OF BLESSED BLUFFERS

THE journey to my new home, of eighty miles, we make by three forms of transport: fifty miles by train; eight miles by foot through the woods; and twenty-two miles by bus. This is necessary because to make connections by train or bus all the way would have taken us a long way around and required us to travel in the unsafe daylight.

Even so, with the three laps, it is an all-night journey. We leave after dark. I feel unhappy starting out for a part of Slovakia that is strange to me.

On the train Anicka and I, for precaution, sit at different

## *I Flee from the Communists*

ends of the carriage. Like that, if I am taken by the police, she will not be taken herself, but will at least know I am. I used to like riding in trains. If it was day, you could relax and look out the windows at the fields rolling by. If it was night, you could look around at all the people and watch their faces, then, after the man came and punched your ticket, you could lie back and let the deep-down voice of the wheels turning over on the rails sing you to sleep. But now I do not dare go to sleep. I do not dare even to look at the people's faces for fear they will ask questions. I am glad when the train part of the trip is over, when at about 1.00 a.m. we pull into a station in a small village.

From the station we start through the woods on our next lap of eight miles' walking. As soon as we get into the woods we stop, and I change into the ski trousers for the first time and Anicka puts on a pair of trousers she has brought, for easier walking.

It is an exceedingly dark night. Soon a drizzling rain begins to slant coldly down from the unseen skies. Our small flashlights make only tiny pricks in the blackness. Anything that makes the slightest noise, even the leaves rustling, shoots little tremors of fear through me. Suddenly there comes a long woo-woo-wo-oo-ing sound.

"What is that?" I say, startled. It is a terrifying sound.

"Owls," Anicka says. "Only owls."

It is the first time in my life I ever remember hearing owls. I begin to think of weird stories I had heard as a child of witches flying around on broomsticks at this time of night and in this kind of wood and weather. Even though I now know from my religion that they are not true, I cannot forget them.

### *A Pair of Blessed Bluffers*

Anicka is a lot less scared than I, so I put my arm through hers and hang onto it. I know she can feel me shivering.

"Don't be afraid, Sister. Everything is going very well, and anyhow, this is experience, isn't it?"

"It's that, all right," I say, and feel the rain needling coldly into my face. Anicka is full of curiosity about life and everything, much more so than me or than almost anyone I have ever met. She reads a lot of books. She would really enjoy almost anything as "experience". For me this particular "experience" is something I could do without.

"The main thing is not to get caught towards the end," she says.

"That part I agree with," I say.

"It's experience, Sister," she says. "Someday I might want to write a book on it."

"I hope I'll be around to read it," I say.

Once I slip into a pool of mud and, having hold of Anicka's arm, pull her down right on top of me. We slip and slide and get very slimy and muddy, even inside our shoes.

"It's experience," I say as I clamber out of the mud.

Anicka laughs. "Sister," she says. "I think you're beginning to catch on."

It is about five in the morning, not quite first light yet, when we emerge from the woods. We change back into our dresses from our muddy trousers. Then we walk into the town where I will catch the bus at six for my new home. In this town Anicka leaves me.

"It might be suspicious if two of us arrive there and I left right away," she says.

She gives me exact directions to the place where I will be staying.

### *I Flee from the Communists*

"There's an old broken gate in front—different from the other gates," she says. And she adds, "You will like the people you are going to, Sister."

So Anicka puts me on the bus. The bus ride is a very long hour. The bus is very crowded and I am lucky to get a seat. I am sleepy but afraid to go to sleep.

From the station in the small town I walk quickly to the place where Anicka has directed me. I see a house with an old broken gate. In a vineyard to the side of the house I see a man picking grapes, and I walk up to him. He is fat and round and red-cheeked and very jolly-looking.

"Are the grapes nice this year?" I ask. "Will they give lots of wine?"

"They are fair," the man says.

"Have you any to sell?"

"Don't you know it's forbidden to sell except to the Government?"

"Oh, that's too bad. I'd like to make some wine for my husband."

It was making conversation during which we could look each other over. Then the man says, "Let's go inside."

We go into the kitchen and a woman is there. She looks just like a copy of the man: fat and round and red-cheeked and jolly-looking and just about his size. They look like a pair of jolly dolls you might see in a shop window.

"I am the one Anicka told you about," I say.

"Good," the woman says and smiles broadly. "I am Orsula. This oaf here is my husband, Ludo."

Ludo laughs loudly.

"Give us some breakfast, old heifer, and stop standing around gaping."

## *A Pair of Blessed Bluffers*

We sit down and have breakfast. In five minutes I feel I have known these two all my life. I know I am going to be happy here, as happy as I can be in hiding, for they are so jolly you cannot be around them and be sad. Also, they are like the people I grew up among, farm people. I feel almost as if I have come home. It is wonderful to find this, and in a different part of Slovakia from mine.

I am supposed to be a relative of Orsula's daughter-in-law. My excuse for being here is to work in the sugar beet fields and the grape vineyards, for this is the season of harvest.

So I put on my ski trousers and my zebra sweater and follow the plough which turns up the sugar beets and I cut off the leaves with a knife. It is good to be out in the fresh fields under the open skies. My main trouble comes from not being used to such work. I get hot, sweating, then cold, and get rheumatism in my right shoulder which for a week I cannot lie on in bed. Also the women talk a lot in the fields and ask me what town I come from and do I know such and such a person there. I try to stay away from the other women as much as possible to avoid questions. This is not so difficult to do in the sugar beet fields, but is more difficult gathering the grapes, where you work closer together.

But Orsula and Ludo—being with people like them makes up for all this. Their house is brick and has wood floors all through it, instead of being a house built of mud and with dirt floors like ours, and the farm is a little bigger than Tato's—eighty acres instead of fifty—but otherwise it is the same as ours, and the people are the same. Also it is the first time I have been on a farm since the Communists took over, and I learn a good deal of how the farmers feel

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about what the Communists are doing to the farms. I am very interested in this, for I am, and will always be, a farm girl.

Nowhere is the resistance to the Communists so great as from the peasants, who are defending their ancient soil. At first the peasants actually used pitchforks and axes to chase the Communists away when they came around to their farms. But now the Communists are too powerful for pitchforks. Now the Communists are collectivizing the farms. Under this system the farmer turns his farm over to the Government co-operative farm, so that it is no longer his, and everything is done together. Everything is ploughed together; all the cows are milked together; the farmers work in the fields together. An inspector who is also a time-keeper keeps the time each farmer works, and the farmer gets a percentage based on the hours he puts in. The co-operative gets the rest.

The Communists do not command the farmers to join the collective farms. But they use various pressures and persuasions to get them to. I am reminded of their way with the nuns. Ninety per cent of the farmers are against the collective farms, wanting to keep for themselves the land that has been handed down through their families for centuries and which they feel is as much a part of themselves as their arms and legs. So the pressures and the persuasions.

One pressure is that the farmer who doesn't join finds it difficult or impossible to get seed to plant his crops. When I am staying with him, Ludo is buying his seed on the black market. He is fighting to hold on to his eighty acres.

"This year I might be able to hang on," he says. "But how much longer, I don't know. It gets harder to do every year. The beloved Communists, they have their means."



## *A Pair of Blessed Bluffers*

If you don't go into the collective farm, but keep your own, you are given quotas by the Government to fulfill. In January, Ludo says, he receives a big order from the Government that he has to produce so much sugar beets, so much walnuts, grapes, meat, pigs, cows, vegetables, eggs, milk. The Government knows his farm right down to how many walnut trees he has and how many walnuts he ought to grow on each. He is allowed to keep so much for his own use. The rest he has to sell to the Government, instead of taking it to the market himself as in the old days.

The quota is the strongest pressure of all. For if the farmer fails to meet the quota, his farm can be taken away from him and put into the collective. Nor is allowance made for nature's fact that on a farm some years are good and some are bad for the crops and the animals—you have to fulfill the quota regardless. In a poor year the Communists are able to get many farms and make them go collective.

"The beloved quota, she and I," Ludo says, "we are in a race that never stops. One day she is ahead. The next day I am. Usually she is a little ahead, but I keep hot on her. Take pigs."

Ludo rolls his eyes in a way he had.

"Last year," he says. "I fell short on the pig's meat required by the Government. So I killed some of my geese and gave them goose meat instead. Wasn't that nice of them to let me do that?"

The quota for hens the year I am on Ludo's farm is eighty eggs per hen per year. If the hen doesn't give that many, you are in trouble. Ludo tells a story about the time one farmer's hen died.

"The farmer put a string on the hen, hung her to a tree,

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and pinned on her breast a sign which said, 'I tried, but I just couldn't lay eighty eggs, and my comrades weren't satisfied when I couldn't fulfill the quota. So there was nothing left but to commit suicide.' "

And Ludo's round belly shakes with laughter.

Ludo's hens themselves are laying short the November I am there. He is terrified that for this the Communists may take his farm away from him and put it in the collective. So to fulfill his quota for eggs and try to hold on to his farm, he buys eggs on the black market for twelve crowns apiece and sells them to the Government for three crowns average, though they are bought by weight then.

When Ludo comes home with some of these twelve-crown eggs which he will have to turn round and sell for three crowns, he is furious.

"I hope all the Communists wake up tomorrow morning paralyzed," he says.

Orsula is, if anything, more infuriated even than Ludo that they have to sell their things of the farm to the Communists, whom she never refers to as Communists but always as *cervene plostice*—"red bedbugs". We would be churning butter, and she would rage against them, her face purpling with her fury. "Ah, this beautiful butter—we're churning this pound for the red bedbugs."

The walnut crop is so poor that year that she and Ludo have to sell all their walnuts to the Government to meet the quota and use breadcrumbs, instead of walnuts, for making their own *kolache* pastry. Orsula is a very good cook when she has the materials, and it infuriates her to have to hand over her cooking ingredients to the Communists.

"How do the red bedbugs expect a woman to cook a

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decent meal when they take all of the ingredients of the recipe?" she storms as she sprinkles breadcrumbs on to the *kolache*. "Next they will take the breadcrumbs and have us put wood shavings in the *kolache*."

The farmer is not only required to sell all his products, except what he is allowed to keep for personal use, to the Government co-operative—he also has to sell them to the co-operative at their prices. These prices are a good deal below what the farmer could get by taking his products directly to market. For a litre of milk from his cows, the Communists give Ludo 25 haliers. They sell that same litre for 1 crown and 50 haliers, which is six times as much. Walnuts selling on the market for 40 crowns the kilo that November, Ludo gets 10 crowns a kilo for from the co-operative. Walnuts are comparatively much higher than milk because the Government says walnuts are a luxury.

As a farm girl I am very much interested in all these things. But I also learn that the peasant in my country is still a very foxy person, even where the Communists are concerned. The peasant was foxy long before the Communists came to power, in centuries of having to be foxy to stay alive. Now he uses this foxiness on his enemy the Communists.

As soon as the Communists catch on to one kind of foxiness and find a way round it, the peasant thinks of another.

• "The wine," says Ludo. "I am allowed to keep enough of my grapes for 200 litres of wine for my own parched throat and those of my family. The rest of the wine I must sell to the beloved Government. We—myself, that is, and some of the other farmers—worked this out for a while. It was very simple: We sweetened the Government wine with water."

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But the Communists finally caught on to this, he says, and found a way round it: They took the grapes instead of the wine.

"The eggs," says Ludo. "The Communists used to take their quotas of eggs by the dozen. We—myself and others—developed a little habit of keeping the larger eggs and giving the Communists the small eggs." And Ludo rolls his eyes. "Is that not natural?"

The Communists cured this foxiness by taking their quota of eggs by the kilo.

"Before the Communists took over," Ludo continues, "we used to make up nice lovely baskets of cherries, apples, and plums to take to the market, filling them only with the loveliest of the fruit, and throwing those with a tinge of rottenness to the pigs, who cannot tell the difference. But to-day under the weight system, where only kilos count, instead of giving these rotten ones to the pigs, we line the bottoms of the baskets with them or scatter them through the good ones and turn them all over to the beloved Communists. This means, alas, that the city people get much uglier fruit from us than in the old days. But is that any fault of ours? No, it isn't. So far, at least, the Communists have not discovered a route around the rotten fruit.

"To-day," says Ludo, "we also tenderly sprinkle a few handfuls of sand in the baskets of vegetables. After all, kilos are the only thing that count. So far the Communists have not devised a way round the sand.

"To-day we add an amount of water to the Communist milk that we sell them. They have not invented a way round that one. It'll be interesting to see how they do. Even the Communists," says Ludo, rolling his eyes, "cannot take a

## *A Pair of Blessed Bluffers*

cow, as they can grapes and make wine, and cut the poor dear up to make milk."

An interesting contest this, between the ancient foxiness of the peasant and the ability of the Communists, with their power, to find ways around the foxiness. Sooner or later, it appears certain that the peasant's supply of foxiness will run out—though I am not sure. It is a deep and centuries-old supply.

Ludo is a great storyteller, especially about anything having to do with the Communists. We pass whole evenings while he tells me stories that the peasants tell about their new life under the Communists.

One story is about a farmer who one summer day was standing out in a lonely field eating the straw from a straw-stack. Along comes Prime Minister Zapotocky—the one who is now President of Czechoslovakia.

"What are you eating the straw for?" asks the perplexed Prime Minister.

"I'm awfully hungry," says the farmer. "And I had to give all my grain to the Government to fulfill the quota. The straw is all I have left to eat for myself."

"What a big shame for the Government!" the Prime Minister says. "Here—here are five hundred crowns. Go and buy yourself a big meal. President Gottwald, the president of all Czechoslovakia, is coming by here soon. If he sees you eating straw, he will wonder what kind of Department of Agriculture my government is running."

When the Prime Minister has left, the farmer thinks it over.

"If the Prime Minister gives me five hundred crowns," he thinks, "from Gottwald I might get one thousand."

## *I Flee from the Communists*

So the farmer goes back to eating the straw.

An hour later Gottwald comes by.

"What are you doing, farmer?" Gottwald asks, amazed to see him eating straw.

The farmer tells Gottwald the same thing he had told the Prime Minister—he has given all his grain to the Government to meet the quota and has left for his own belly only straw.

"Why, that's an outrage!" says Gottwald, "To think that in Czechoslovakia people are eating straw. Here—here are one thousand crowns. Go and get yourself a very big meal. Stalin is coming by here soon. If he sees you, what is he going to think of Czechoslovakia, that people are eating straw? Stalin will wonder what kind of Government we've got here."

Gottwald goes away, and the farmer stands a moment thinking.

"If the Prime Minister gives me five hundred crowns when he sees me eating straw," he thinks, "and Gottwald gives me one thousand—what would Stalin give me? From Stalin I might get fifteen hundred or three thousand."

So he goes back to eating straw.

An hour later Stalin himself comes by and sees the farmer eating straw.

"*Chto ty delaesh?*" Stalin asks in Russian, amazed. "What are you doing?"

"I can't help it," the farmer tells Stalin, "I have nothing to eat. They took everything off me to fill up the quota."

Stalin looks penetratingly at the farmer. "Farmer," he says, "you're awfully dumb. Just think of it yourself, and you will see how dumb you are. You're eating the straw in

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the summer. How stupid you are! You should keep the straw for winter and go and graze in the pasture."

And Ludo would roar back laughing, his red cheeks ablaze with mirth and his round belly shaking.

Another story Ludo tells is about the five year plan which has gone into effect in Czechoslovakia. When the plan is ordered in one village, the Communists appoint as *starosta*, or head man of the town, charged with seeing to it that the plan is fulfilled, a peasant who can't even read or write. So the peasant *starosta* gathers all the other peasants together.

"What is this five year plan?" the *starosta* inquires.

"We don't know," the peasants all say. "We never heard of it. The best thing would be that you go and see President Gottwald and ask him."

So the peasant takes the train to Prague and goes in to see Gottwald, who starts to give him a book of instructions on the five year plan.

"I can't read," the peasant *starosta* says.

Gottwald looks at him a long moment. "No?" he says, and starts walking up and down the room. "Well, come over here to the window."

The peasant walks over to Gottwald's window. The two men stand looking down the street.

"You see that tram?" Gottwald says.

"Yuh," the farmer says.

"Well," says Gottwald, "the five year plan means that we've got to work so hard that five years from now there will be, not one of those trams, but five hundred."

Gottwald turns back enthusiastically to the peasant. "That's what the five year plan means! Five hundred more of everything!" Gottwald starts walking up and down the

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room. "Comrade *Starosta*! Go back and tell your comrade peasants that that is the meaning of the five year plan!"

The peasant takes the train back to his village. There he gathers all the other peasants together in his home. He walks up and down in front of them, just like Gottwald. Then he tells them all to come with him to the window.

But at the window he can't see a tram, for the village has none, and for a moment he is confused. But not for long. His eyes light up as he sees a beggar coming down the street.

"Comrade peasants!" he says. "You see that beggar?"

"Yes," the peasants say.

"Comrades!" he says enthusiastically. "The meaning of the five year plan is that we all have to work harder so that five years from now there will be, not one, but hundreds of those on the streets!"

And Ludo doubles up with laughter, and his eyes roll and roll.

And so the time passes for me, again somewhat pleasantly. Orsula and Ludo are good to stay with because they are so jolly. They are also safer to stay with than some because they are able to handle almost any unexpected situation. We have a comical but possibly dangerous situation one night when some real relatives of the daughter-in-law come from the next village for a visit, and it becomes necessary for me, as the pretending relative of the daughter-in-law, to stay out of sight.

Just before they arrive, Orsula sends me to bed in my room near the living-room. The relatives have just come when I get into bed. It is a typical Slovak farmhouse bed with straw placed on top of plain boards and over the straw, a sheet. I may have been nervous and tossed around too



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much. Anyhow, suddenly there is a great clatter as the boards give way. I find myself sprawled on the floor.

Orsula comes hurrying in. "What are you trying to do?" she whispers to me. "Wake up the dead?"

I explained that it just happened. "Well, you'll just happen to have to lie quiet where you are," she says, "until they leave."

So I have to lie on the floor, in the tumble of boards and straw, and be very quiet. It is three hours before Orsula comes in again.

"You can get up now," she says. "The real relatives have gone. They thought there were ghosts in the house when they heard that noise. A whole regiment of ghosts. I told them it was the cat had knocked something over. They didn't dare question their own in-laws."

Orsula's and Ludo's genius for bluffing comes to my help on at least a couple of other times.

It has been a long time again since I have gone to church, very long for a nun, and I feel the need of it greatly. One day I ask Orsula if, please, I can go. She thinks this over a long time, and I implore her.

"All right then," she finally agrees. "But be careful not to act like a nun, Sister."

She tells me not to hold my hands palms together like a nun does when praying, but to cross them one on top of the other, like other people do. She tells me not to go in the church first and stay last, like a nun does. And she gives me money to put in the collection plate, like a nun doesn't.

It is a good plan. But it forgets that when I am in church I am transported to other worlds. One day I put on the embroidered green pleated skirt with the blue apron and

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the cream blouse and the white kerchief that Anicka had brought me and go to church. The next day one of the ladies of the village comes to see Orsula.

"Isn't that some kind of nun you have staying with you?" she says. "I saw her with the palms of her hands together in church. Also, she had a Latin prayer book in her hands."

I had forgotten it all, all I was supposed to be careful about! But Orsula is a good bluffer. She turns angrily on the woman.

"Are you stupid?" she says. "What kind of a nun would she be? You probably are very stupid and getting blind, too. How could she both have her palms together and be holding a prayer book? Maybe she is not a nun, but a juggler? And what are you doing anyhow, watching someone praying? For shame!"

Pretty soon the woman is apologizing all over and asking Orsula's forgiveness.

"All right," Orsula says gruffly. "But don't let it happen again."

Orsula and Ludo are good bluffers for my sake and for their own. One day, too rainy for sugar beet cutting, I am sitting by the window, sewing. I am embroiderying a little white shirt for the first child of Orsula's daughter-in-law, who will be coming along about Christmas. It is a very pretty shirt with pink embroidery for the firstborn, who in Slovakia always gets the best.

I hear some noises in front of the house. And I look up and see the green police car pull up. Out of the car step some men whom I identify only too well as the S.N.B., the *Statna Narodna Bezpecnost*—the National Security Police, who make security for the Government but very little for the

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people. They are wearing the green uniforms and the dark belts with the guns hanging from them. Their leader is wearing boots.

For a moment all my breath stops. Suddenly I am looking at my hands, and they are trembling violently. I think, "Oh, Saint Joseph," and that my soul is going to leave my body in one second.

I grab up my sewing and run through the house, looking for a place to hide. But there is none in this house. So I go to the kitchen, as a natural place for a woman to be. I try to sit there and go on with my sewing, but my fingers are shaking so, I keep jabbing myself instead of the little baby shirt.

Then I hear loud noises all through the house. Then I hear the noise in the living-room right next to me. Then, and all the fear rushes up like a choking wave in me, three big policemen step into the kitchen.

They stand looking down at me as if wondering who I am and as if getting ready to ask me a question. I keep my hands under the table to hide the shaking. Then I hear Ludo's voice right behind them shouting: "Go ahead and look if you think you can find it! See for yourself!"

The National Security Police pop open all the cupboards and peer in them. They open the broom cupboard and look in there. They stoop down and open the cupboard to the sink and peer in there. They even open the oven and stick their heads in there.

Then they stand up, and I can feel them looking down again at me. I feel that I will not be able to make a sound if they ask me a question now.

"All right!" suddenly shouts Ludo. "Have you looked

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enough? You certainly have looked everywhere there is to look in this humble house of mine!"

And his voice rises almost to a bellow.

"Are you satisfied now there's no whisky here?"

Which is true, for Ludo makes the whisky—slivovica from prunes—at his neighbour's. It takes four weeks, then the ~~prune~~ whisky is ready. It is very strong whisky.

Now November is almost gone, and it is time for me to move again, lest the police get on my trail or neighbours' talk find me out. Particularly I am thinking the people of the village might still get suspicious because of that time of the Latin prayer book and the palms together. So Anicka gets me another place.

This new place is to be my last home in my own country.

But before I go there, my older sister comes to visit me.

This is the first time I have seen any of my family since leaving the hospital, and she comes to bring me some clothes. I see her for about half an hour, and for that the Communists later caught her and sentenced her to three-and-a-half years in prison. Also, they sentenced my younger sister, for the reason she was in my parents' house when the police raided it and found some of my nun's clothes there, which were there all the time anyhow from the days even before the Communists came to power, and so they accused her of helping to hide me. The truth is, I have never seen her from the time I left the hospital until this day. But the police making the raid must take somebody, and since my father is old, over seventy, and my mother is a cripple with the palsy, they take my younger sister, who did nothing. They give her three years. It is after I cross the border that I hear my two sisters have been arrested, both on 29 January

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1952. I give Saint Joseph a deadline until March to get them free. But they are sentenced anyhow, and it is one of the few times in my life I am angry with Saint Joseph, for not doing his duty the way I wanted, so angry that for a while I give up praying to him and even take his picture out of my prayer book. But then after six months my sisters are taken out of the prison and put on the prison farm, which ~~is~~ is easier, and their sentences are reduced to a little less than two years. So I give Saint Joseph credit for this and put him back in the prayer book, and we are friends again, and a little before Christmas of last year, 1953, my sisters go free.

One day I say good-bye to Orsula and Ludo, holding each of them with an arm which won't reach right round either of them.

"God bless you for what you have done," I say.

Ludo speaks to his wife. "Stop crying, old heifer."

"Who's crying, fat oaf," Orsula says.

"Good-bye." I try to smile. "Keep up the quota, Ludo."

"Ah, my beloved quota," Ludo says. "I wonder which one of us will get the other in the end?" He rolls his eyes. "For either I will get her—or she will get me."

## I 4

### YOU CAN'T GO ON LIKE THIS

**N**ow I go to the last place I am to stay in during my hiding. The last—and loneliest. It is a farmhouse right off on a rough side road that is almost impassable even in a

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small shower. The house is not in sight of any other house. It is the house of a widow named Valera. It is an extremely desolate place, my last home in my own country. Now I am getting more fearful all the time, feeling they must catch me soon. Also, in this house the loneliness fills me. Here I am not far from my parents' home, less than an hour on the train. But it is too dangerous for me to go to them or for them to come to me, though my mother could not travel in any case. Now I am in complete hiding. For over five weeks, certainly my loneliest ones.

But there is one big thing to relieve the loneliness. If God had picked one thing to relieve my loneliness and sent it down from heaven to me, He could not have done better.

It is a little girl with very curly dark hair who wears a red sweater most of the time. Her name is Hanka.

I have not had the company of any child since I left the hospital. She is the first. And the children are what I miss most of all. Finding her in that lonely house is like finding a tiny shrine in the midst of the lonely woods. She is ten years old. She is Valera's little daughter.

I help her with her school lessons, especially drawing and geography, which were always two of my favourite subjects. Sometimes, helping her, I feel almost the thrill of being a teacher again. In the geography book I point out many faraway places, some of which I was later to go to but had no idea of this then.

Around dark we sometimes go out into the fields, Hanka and I. In sudden bursts of fun we chase each other, laughing across the fields and making them less lonely. Then we sit down in the fields to get our breath. and I tell her stories Tato used to tell me, such as the story about how the *skov-*

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*ranok*, the Slovak field bird, got created—how the farmer was sad and lonely in the fields until Jesus came one day, picked up a piece of dirt on which was the farmer's sweat, threw it in the air, and out flew the *skovranok* singing, and after that the farmer was encouraged to have someone always with him.

One dusk we go out into the fields and pick a pumpkin. We clean it and make a man's face on it, cutting in the teeth and then putting a candle inside and setting it carefully by the side of the road, which is something you do in my country to have fun when the pumpkins are ripe in the autumn and you want to give someone a nice scare.

One late dusk we find some poppy heads and pick them. We sit down in the middle of the fields and eat the seeds. I tell her about the time when I was a little girl and got into trouble picking someone else's poppy seeds, the time the watchman came and caught me.

"Can a bad little girl grow up to be a nun?" Hanka asks me.

"This one did," I say.

Hanka knows I am a nun, for we decide it is best to tell her. It is surely bound to come out in me anyhow, being with her that long. We warn her often not to tell anybody in school or out of it that I am there.

"If you do," her mother Valera tells her, "what happened to your aunt will happen to Sister."

• Hanka's aunt, a nun, had been returning to Slovakia from Germany, where she had been studying, when the Communists caught her with a letter containing "political information". It did no good for her to tell the Communists that it was a letter from a friend expressing condolences to another friend whose mother had died. The condolence

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part, the Communists claimed, was nothing but a code. This was another excuse to put someone wearing a religious habit in jail, where Hanka's aunt was now serving a sentence of a year and a half.

"My aunt has her nun's clothes off, too," Hanka tells me. "They made her take them off in jail. Will you be my aunt until she gets out?"

"I would be very happy to be," I say.

We have taught her never to call me "Sister", lest she get in the habit and unwittingly use the word in school. But after that she calls me "my golden aunt".

I am very interested in this little girl also to see what effect the Communist education is having by now on the children. Hanka herself is probably not typical. She is wise and conscious beyond her age about the new Government, she sees straight through it. Then, also, her aunt's imprisonment has made her aware that the Communists are not quite as kindly as they make themselves out to be. On top of this, her mother, Valera, makes sure to do everything possible to counter the Communist education in her daughter by giving her daily religious instruction at home, in which I help while I am there. With all this the effects of the Communist education are little noticeable in Hanka. But from talking with her about her schools, it is easy to guess the effects on less fortunate children—and also I learn that the Communists are dealing with the village schools, like Hanka's, as they were dealing with the city schools in Bratislava when I was there.

One of the chief changes in the schools, I gather from Hanka, is the one I could see starting when I had my kindergarten, and growing when I was in the hospital—



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now it seems thoroughly rooted. This is the Communist emphasis, not on study and books, but on their everlasting work programme—"Honour to Work". I get the feeling, talking with Hanka, that the Communists don't care how stupid the children are—work is the important thing. Hanka, aged ten, is required to spend time every afternoon after school and on Saturdays and Sundays in the children's work brigades. The children at her school have to clean their own school and wash the school windows. They have to work in the fields. Hanka complains to me.

"My mother has so much work to do," she says. "But I can't help my mother. I have to go and work in somebody else's fields."

In her childish but acute way, she can see the unreason of this, but she can't understand why they are doing it.

The children are learning some things out of books, however.

"Golden Aunt," Hanka says one day, "I'll teach you Russian."

So I try to learn a little of the Russian that Hanka is being taught in school. And we would have our little Russian lesson together. I am greatly in favour of teaching languages, including Russian. But this one is being taught in Hanka's school with an idea behind it—Hanka is even learning Russian political songs.

As with the schools in Bratislava, there is no more religious instruction at all in her village school, Hanka tells me. Here there is not even a Crazy Kornel in a Roman collar, which is one thing at least to be thankful for. The priest from the nearby town who used to come to their school and give them instruction, Hanka tells me, comes no more.

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"They took him off somewhere," she says vaguely. "Per-haps to the big people's work brigade?"

And so I spend much time with Hanka, and it is nice to have a little girl to be with, even in hiding. Then, in that lonely house, Christmas draws near. Its approach seems to draw a cloak of loneliness around me, for this will be my first Christmas in hiding and away from the old happy times.

But I try, as much as possible, to do the things of Christmas. Even in Christmas though, you cannot escape the Communists, for they have their finger in there, too. Besides doing everything possible to discourage the people from celebrating Christmas in the old way, the Communists are now trying to make something political out of it when it is celebrated. The first big Christmas event in Slovakia is Saint Nicholas Day on 6 December! But now there is not supposed, any longer, to be a Saint Nicholas. Now it is "*Deda Mraz*"—"Grandpa Frost". Grandpa Frost is supposed to be an old, bent-down man from the Siberian snows with a big bundle of good things which he brings right from Russia into Slovakia. Everything good, is the idea, is supposed to come from Russia.

"*Zlata Teticka*, Golden Auntie," Hanka asks me one day near 6 December, "the schoolteacher has asked us all to draw a Grandpa Frost. Will you help me make one?"

"I will not," I say.

It is the only thing I have ever refused her.

"I will make you a Jesus in the manger," I say. This is what the schoolteachers used to have the children make.

"I'll get a bad mark if I take Jesus in the manger to school," Hanka says.

But we draw a Jesus in the manger and cut it out with

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scissors. Then I realize this might really get her in trouble if she took it to school, so I don't give it to her. She tries to make a drawing of Grandpa Frost herself but finally gives it up. I expect her home teaching from her mother is sticking.

"I will just tell the comrade teacher that I couldn't do it," she says, "because I don't know what he looks like I've never seen him. Golden Aunt, have you ever seen Grandpa Frost?"

"No," I say, "and I don't care to see him." I am a little bit impatient, I am afraid, on the subject of Grandpa Frost.

In the former days at Christmastime the people used to make a wax Jesus in the manger by pouring wax into a mould which you could buy. Then they would put the wax model under the Christmas tree. Now there are no moulds to be bought to make the models from. The word *manger*, however, is still used by the people. In accordance with the "Honour to Work" gospel, all mothers have to work even if they have small children. During the day the Government keeps their children in nurseries. As a bitter joke the people refer to these nurseries as "mangers." The joke tells what has happened to all the creatures which used to be in the manger that Jesus had been in at Christmas.

"The donkey," it says, "is now running the Government office. The cow and the ox are on the collective farm. Mary has to take Jesus to the manger (that is, the Government nursery) and go to work in the fields. So there is no more Christmas."

The other side of the joke the people tell is this: "We don't have Christmas just at Christmastime now. We have it all the year round. All the Government offices have a

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big five-pointed star over them, just like in Bethlchem, even if it does have an added hammer and a sickle through it. And just as in the time of the Nativity, below the star is the barn (that is, the Government office)—just as dirty, and with lots of donkeys and oxen inside.”

Then in Valera's farmhouse, Christmas Eve comes. It will be the worst Christmas I have ever had, I think, but I try to comfort myself with “The Blessed Virgin Mary had only a barn at this time of year. At least I have a house.”

On Christmas Eve I am frightened by something that happens. About noon a man comes by the house. The house being so lonely and set off, it is very rare for someone to come by it. The man is wearing worker's clothes, and he has cut his leg in the field. I can see it bleeding. He asks for first aid, and Valera, knowing I worked at the hospital, asks me to take care of him. So I wash his leg, which is very dirty with the soil from the field, put iodine in the cut, and bandage him.

As I am wrapping the bandage around his leg, the man looks up at me and smiles slowly.

“You have hands like a nurse,” he says. “You would make a good sister-nurse.”

I am startled and look quickly at him. But I decide he is only talking.

Still, when he goes off, I watch him for a while, thoughtfully, as he walks away from the house and until he is out of sight.

I do not know that we are even going to celebrate Christmas. Valera and Hanka keep it for me as a surprise.

I first learn a little of the surprise when, towards dusk of Christmas Eve, Hanka comes in to me and takes my hand.

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"Come, Golden Auntie!" she says. "It's Christmas Eve! Let's go into the fields and get a tree."

So we go out and find a little piece of pine branch for a tree. When we get back with it, the house is full of the good smells such as I used to smell on Christmas Eve.

"We are going to have a regular Christmas Eve dinner," Valera says from in front of the stove. "Grandpa Frost is not invited."

While she goes on with her cooking, Hanka and I go into the dining-room. First we pull down the blinds to protect our secret Christmas. Then we lean the little piece of pine branch against a corner of the dining-room. Under it we put my drawing of Jesus in the manger.

Then, when it is dark, we keep Christmas Eve like they used to keep it.

Hanka leaves the room, and Valera and I put out all the lights and sit down at the table and wait. Then comes a knock on the door.

"Glory be to God in the highest . . ." a little voice says from the other side of the door.

". . . and on earth peace among men of goodwill." Valera and I answer.

Then we open the door and let Hanka in. She is carrying a lighted candle. She stands holding it in both hands and speaks to us.

"I wish you a very merry Christmas and that Jesus will give you health and luck all through the coming year and after you die take you to heaven," she says, as her mother has taught her.

"God give you the same," we answer.

Then Hanka puts the candle on the table. I open the

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prayer book. I lean forward so that I can read it by the candle's light. I read from the Gospel of Saint Luke about Jesus' birth:

"And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds watching and keeping the night-watches over their flock. And behold an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone round about them, and they feared with a great fear. And the angel said to them: Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people; for this day is born to you a SAVIOUR, who is Christ the Lord . . ."

Then we all pray together the Lord's prayer. "Our Father, Who art in heaven . . ."

We get tiny candles and put them on the pine branch and light them. Then, standing, we sing "Silent Night, Holy Night".

Then we put all the lights on; Valera brings in the supper. Hanka's eyes glow big and she bounces up and down in her chair.

"Look! Look! Look!"

It is a big and delicious dinner. A carp fish dipped in egg batter and fried. Sauerkräut and beans and potato salad. And, finally, pastry balls covered with poppy seed.

It is a wonderful surprise, this celebration, and I think how good Valera and Hanka are. But looking over at the window I feel an ache, too, that the blinds must be down.

Thus is my last Christmas in my own country.

Immediately after Christmas, Valera goes off to Bratislava

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to her son's wedding, taking Hanka with her, and I am left all alone in this desolate house except for the hired hand, who, as soon as she is gone, hastens to the village and gets drunk and stays away. The countryside is surely enough to make a man drink whisky, but it means I have to do all the care of the animals, the cows, the horses, and the pigs. So I put on the old ski trousers Anicka had brought me and do it.

The day after Valera leaves, it starts to rain. I did not think it possible for this place to be any more dreary, but the rain makes it so, coming steadily down and turning everything, sky and land, into one mass of grey, lonely nothingness. I am in the kitchen cleaning up when I hear Valera's black collie dog bark from under the back porch where he stays out of the rain. I step over to the window.

Walking through the rain very slowly towards the house is a Communist policeman wearing the green uniform.

I jump to a corner next to the window. I am shaking all over. I feel my heart beating like an anvil inside me, and my blood seems to leave my body drop by drop. So now I know: they have waited until I am all alone to come for me, so that no one will even know that I am taken away. Suddenly it flashes across my mind that the man with the cut was really a spy.

In that corner of the kitchen I try to think and to pray, all together. But then, through the rain, come noises that shut off both the thinking and the praying.

The noises are of someone going around the house trying all the doors, which I keep locked now that Valera is away.

"Maybe," I suddenly hope, "he will think no one is here and go away."

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Then I hear him knocking on the window. Then I hear him yell: "Open the door! Don't be afraid."

How foolish to think he would go away! For he would know that someone would have to be home to tend the animals. The knocking keeps coming, and I think I will faint away. I do not want to faint. I want to go, when I go, standing up.

Then I hear him yell again: "Open the door, Sister!"

So he knows I am a nun! Now I know my time is at last come. They have me now, as it must have been certain from the first they would. After it all, they have me. After the sleeping in haylofts and attics, after the false identification, after the huddling in secret hideout rooms, after the invented families and relatives, after the sneaking into dark churches to take the Holy Communion, the darting about by night like a hunted animal, after the flights across muddy fields—after it all. After the Veronikas and Dominiks, the Sister Margitas, the Anickas and Rosas and Julkas, the Martas and Orsulas and Ludos and Valeras—after all the brave people, they have me. After it all. All my fleeing, all my hiding, all my putting on the civilian clothes—it all, all of it, comes to no good. I wish, standing there pressed into a corner of that kitchen, that I had my religious habit to put on so that I could go that way, proudly. But I am to go only in an old pair of ski trousers. I close my eyes and pray God to clothe me now, now as I go, in courage and pride.

"Now, when the last moments are coming," I pray, "the hardest moments are coming, when it's coming to the end, help me now," and I bless myself. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, amen. In the name of them all, I'm going to open the door."



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And I step up and open it, giving myself up now to the police, and saying as I do, "Glory be to the name of Jesus!"

"For ever amen," the policeman says.

And he takes my trembling hand and he says, "Sister, do not be afraid. I am a priest."

"A priest!"

This man is Father Jano, who is one of the most remarkable of all priests in Czechoslovakia, a very legend of a priest. He has a death sentence on his head. He is a Salesian missionary—these are ones who take the Gospel all over the world and work mostly with young people. He has escaped from concentration camp a year before and now goes around the country, frequently in Communist clothes and with the false papers of a Communist, boldly organizing the underground. His name is known among all the priests and nuns, including me, and whispered like a prayer.

Now he holds my trembling hand, and suddenly I burst into tears.

He comes in out of the rain and makes me sit down in the kitchen and tells me Sister Margita has sent him to comfort me. Blessed Margita! It takes a long while for my heart to stop booming, my body to stop trembling, from thinking he was the police come for me. It takes a while more for him to convince me fully that he is not a spy himself come to trap me. but the real Father Jano. He gives me the names of many sisters at the hospital to prove that he knows them and that he can be trusted.

"Calm yourself, Sister," he says, and he holds my hand. "Be calm. I am not a Communist spy. I am a priest."

I mention about the man with the cut leg and my suspicion that he was a spy.

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Father Jano smiles. "Do you think they would go so far as to have a man cut his leg in order to carry out a ruse?" He pauses a moment. "Yes, they might."

Finally I am convinced, and my shaking body starts to be quiet. Then I talk to him a long, long time and pour out all the long-held-back misery in me, telling him how bad I feel about not wearing my religious habit. He says I am doing as God wants.

"Look at me," he says, "a priest pretending to be a Communist."

So I feel much better. "Sister," he says, "you should feel proud. I think you may be the only sister who has succeeded in getting away from the Communists. You should be very proud of that."

"I am not very proud," I say. "Most of the time I feel miserable."

"Sister Margita told me all about you—" he goes on as if he has not heard me about my misery, "how you got away at the hospital. I'd like to have seen the faces of those Communist police after you escaped."

He laughs. "And especially I'd like to have seen what kind of decoration that police officer in charge of the raiding party got. A knotted rope, I should imagine."

"Father," I say, "I feel very miserable nearly all of the time."

"Yes, Sister, you should be very proud about being the only one to escape," he says, as if he is still not hearing me about my misery. "I don't think any other nun has tried to do what you did. That is something, and it would be a fine thing indeed to carry it the rest of the way."

I look closely at him, but I don't know what he means and I think I don't want to pursue it.

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I give him some *kolache* and get him some fresh underwear that Valera's son has left behind. Father Jano stays with me three days. Valera comes back the next day, and I tell her only that he is a priest, not that he is the famous Father Jano, and when she sees him, she takes me aside.

"Are you sure he's a priest?" she says, "I never saw a priest with a moustache."

"My lady," I say, "that is exactly how strange the times are, that a priest must wear a moustache."

During Father Jano's stay with us I learn something of his story and his work, which he tells me in order to encourage me, and especially of the underground, or the undergrounds, for I learn now that there are many of them.

Father Jano had been in a monastery and then had been put into a concentration camp work brigade like other convent priests. The parish priests were generally permitted to stay in their parishes at first, but the convent priests were taken, like the convent nuns, the Communists using the argument that these were not doing anything and this was no "Honour to Work". Actually it was a wedge. First they take the convent priests and nuns. Later they take the parish priests.

Then Father Jano had escaped from the concentration camp by going over the fence one night. He had had to lie three hours in a ditch while the prison lights scoured the countryside. Five miles away from the prison was a young man of the underground waiting for him on a motor-cycle. Father Jano, crawling on his stomach from one ditch to another, made his way to him and changed his prison uniform into some civilian clothes the young man had for him. Then they hopped on the motor-cycle and started off.

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But then when they came to a crossroads where there was a policeman, they had to stop for the intersection, and the motor-cycle died out. The policeman came striding over.

"Let me see your identification cards," he said.

The young man showed him his. Then, before the policeman could ask for Father Jano's, Father spoke up.

"*Pan Policajt*," he said respectfully, "Mr. Policeman, d'you know anything about motor-cycles? This thing keeps spitting all the time."

"Why, as a matter of fact," said the policeman, "I do know a thing or two about motor-cycles."

The policeman got very interested in the motor-cycle problem and started fussing around with the engine. The motor-cycle coughed a few times and then suddenly fired and the engine started roaring in very lively fashion. The young man and Father Jano leaped on the motor-cycle and the policeman gave them a big push and away they went, and Father Jano never had to show the identification he hadn't got.

That was a year ago. Father Jano has been in the underground since and has helped dozens to escape across the border. He is a small, square-jawed man and is about forty-five, but looks much older now and terribly, terribly tired, worn out and very thin, and much in need of a little rest from his year in the underground. A hard year. He has been lucky, but he has had some close ones.

One day near dusk, just two months before, he was on a train—he was wearing civilian clothes this time, instead of the Communist uniform. Suddenly he noticed that a man across from him and down the aisle was looking at him from time to time. After a while the man got up and started

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down the carriage, showing his badge and asking everyone for his identification card. A plain-clothes man. Father Jano concluded that all this was being done on account of him. So he got up casually, and walked towards the end of the car. As the train slowed down nearing a bridge under repair, he jumped off. The plain-clothes man must have pulled a cord because after Father Jano had jumped, the train stopped. But Father Jano got away.

Now he feels that they are on his trail again, and he has come here not only to comfort me, and something else as I was later to discover, but also to hide out for a few days himself until things perhaps calmed down. He has to do this every once in a while, then start over, going back to his underground work. He has helped many to get out, but his usefulness is almost at an end now because they are getting on his trail, as they always must after so long.

This is to be expected. When it happens, one of two things usually follows: either the person is captured by the Communists, or he gets over the border. When they get on his trail like this, the thing usually is for the underground to try to get that man over the border. Then someone else does his job for a few months, until the Communists get on *that* one's trail. Then the underground tries to get that man across. This way the personnel in the underground is constantly turning over, making it that much more difficult for the Communists.

But the thing that makes it most difficult of all for the Communists is the fact that there is not one underground, but several actually. This interesting fact I learn for the first time from Father Jano. I learn more of the underground from Father Jano than I have from anyone. There are many

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undergrounds. Father Jano, for example, has never even heard of Rosa and Julka, who kept one of the most active hideouts in one underground. He works in a different underground from them. All this is deliberate, too. By having many undergrounds which are independent of each other, each with its own hideouts, its own boats and the rest of it, even if the Communists break one, there are still many others. For the persons being hidden out, such as me, there is criss-crossing, going from one underground to the other to be hidden out. But the people doing the underground work keep separate. It is this fact more than any other single fact, I believe, which enables the underground to stay alive, and makes it almost impossible for the Communists to break it up.

Father Jano is one of the most clever men I have ever seen. I think he could fool Stalin himself. One day Valera has a lady visitor from the town who sits in the living-room and complains that the Government won't let people like herself buy milk direct from the farmers any more.

"What are you grumbling about?" Father Jano reproves her. "We've got a good Government. We're going to have everything in a very short time. You should put up with a lot more than you do."

Father Jano gives the woman a look cold as a carp's eye.

"My advice to you," he says, "is that you talk less and do more yourself. 'Honour to Work', as we Communists say."

Pretty soon the woman cuts her visit short and Valera walks her to the door, where the woman whispers furiously to her.

"You keeping such a Communist! He's a dirty Communist,

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and you give him a roof over his head! You should throw him right out."

"Oh, he's not as bad as he looks," says Valera. "He's only trying to keep his job."

One day I make my confession to Father Jano in the living-room. He sits in a chair and I kneel on the floor. Then I ask him if he will celebrate Mass, and we pull the blinds down and make an altar on the dining-room table. A white tablecloth, the Cross in the centre of the table resting on a handkerchief of Valera's son's, and two candles. For the wine and the host, we use some I had got from the priest at Marta's and carried with me since, in case the opportunity should come. Father Jano wears the Communist clothes and I wear the ski trousers. Valera and Hanka, who is very wide-eyed, kneel in front of the table-altar. I assist at Mass, giving the responses, and since there is only one book, my prayer book, Father Jano and I have to pass it back and forth for praying and the responses, and thus is offered the low Mass. And Father Jano intones in Latin:

*"Give judgment for me, O God, and decide my cause against an unholy people, from unjust and deceitful men deliver me . . ."*

And I, assisting, give the response:

*"For Thou, O God, art my strength, why hast Thou forsaken me? And why do I go about in sadness, while the enemy afflicts me?"*

After the Mass I feel much better again. Then before he leaves, Father Jano takes me aside.

"Sister," he says, "you can't go on like this."

"What do you mean, Father?" I say.

"This life, Sister," he says. "This living in holes. This trembling when someone comes to the house. This having to pull down the blinds during Mass."

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He looks long at me. "Sister," he says, "you must leave the country."

Leave the country! I am shocked to hear these words, for since the time of Zofia's offer when I was at Rosa's and Julka's, I have dismissed the idea entirely.

Now I look closely into his eyes. "Is that why you really came here, Father? To get me to do that?"

"Yes," he says quietly.

"I'm afraid to do it," I say. "I don't have the courage."

"God will take away your fear," he says. "Or at least help you bear it. And all courage comes from God. He will give you of His plentiful store."

Father Jano speaks earnestly to me. "Sister," he says, "you are the only nun who has escaped so far that I know of. Wouldn't you like to be the first one across the border, too?"

"No," I say.

He smiles softly, and then I raise the old argument. "Would it pay to go away for such a short time? Two or three months and the whole thing will be over. The Communists will be out, and there will be a change in the Government."

Now he really smiles. "Where did you hear that, Sister?"

"It hardly seems worth while going away for that short a time," I go on as if I have not heard him. "Putting one's life in danger for so short a time, instead of just waiting for the change."

Father Jano sighs a long sigh. Something at the back of my mind tells me I have heard exactly the same sigh before. Then I remember—the sigh of Anicka when she, too, was trying at Rosa's and Julka's to get me to leave the country



and I had to use the same argument about the change just-around-the-corner.

"Sister," Father Jano says, "that change will be a long time coming. It will be years."

"Years?" I say. "I cannot believe it."

"It is true, Sister. It will be years. And they might catch you next week—and what then?"

I am silent, preferring not to think what then.

"In another country"—Father Jano leans forward, and he is very intent now—"in another country, Sister, you can be in another convent of your community and put on your nun's habit again."

Indeed he is a persuasive man, and a very wise one. He knows just the one word to use. When he uses it, it is like a vision. When he says that word *convent*, when I think of being out of these holes, out from behind these drawn blinds, out from this having to stay in during the daytime and going out only at night like a weasel, out from my body waiting always to start trembling at the slightest noise, out from all this, and in a place where there is peace and people can look each other in the face and do their work—when he says that word *convent*, it is like a vision; I stop all argument with myself, I do not even think. I know, all at once, that I will go.

"Sister, I will arrange it all," Father Jano says, as if it is decided—and he must know from my face that it is. "The money, everything. Now listen to me."

He leans forward again and gives me the plan.

"In a few days I will send a man to your house here. He will try to buy some grapes and walnuts from you. That will be the sign you can trust him. With the Communists it is

forbidden to buy things of a farmer directly, so it will be unusual for you to get such a visit. If you tell him you have none for sale, he will keep saying, 'Yes, I know you have. I don't care about the price, I just want to buy them.' This man will tell you when to be ready. Do whatever this man says."

A week later—it is Friday—I am washing dishes in the kitchen when a man who looks like a farmer comes to the door, and I can hear him asking Valera: "Have you any grapes and walnuts to sell?" And Valera says no and the man keeps insisting. And I know that this is the man. And the man talks to me. First he tells me what to take with me. He tells me to take some good shoes, for I will have to walk a lot. He tells me to take some first aid supplies. He tells me to take as little of everything as possible, or I will have to throw it away.

"Most of all, Sister," he says. "do not take anything religious like a rosary or a Cross. For this is the one set of documents that will identify you the quickest."

He tells me to be ready to receive a visit from another man tomorrow who will also, like Father Jano, be dressed like a Communist policeman, but will in reality be a priest too, by name, Father Filip. And to be prepared, the day after that, which will be Sunday, to leave the country forever.

He leaves then, and I can feel all the fear rising up in me like the lava in the volcano, but I know I must do it.

Now I have one of the hardest things in all my life to do, and that night I go to do it, for it is my last chance.

I go that night to see my parents.

It is very dangerous for them for me to go there, but I

think, I must see them for a few minutes before I go. For I have not seen them since fleeing the hospital—and all they know is that I am in hiding for doing something the new Government didn't like.

## 15

### GOOD-BYE TO TATO

**I** TIME it to get there about midnight, and even so I stand for a while in the back yard, amongst the trees and the dark cold, hesitating to go in. It is all dark inside. My home. Where I was born and grew up and where I left to become a nun and which now I will leave for ever.

Then I walk up and knock on the kitchen door.

My father comes to the door, wearing the thick white, homemade, flaxen nightshirt he always wears and carrying the coal-oil lantern. And he looks at me a long, long time in the light of the lamp, looks as if I am come back from the dead before he says, "Cilka," his pet name for me. Then he says, "*Dcerka* (Daughter)." And he sets down the lantern and he puts his arms around me, and together we weep.

"Come inside, my daughter," he says. "Ah, ah," he moans, like a long wailing, but of happiness, "at last you come . . . you come home." And my heart breaks within me for what I soon must tell him.

We sit down at the table in the kitchen and look at each

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other over the lamp. It is seven months since I have seen him, the last time on a visit home from the hospital. He had looked much older then. But now he is bent and greying around the sides of his head, though on top his hair remains as dark brown as ever.

"Your clothes, Cilka . . ." he says. "You are not wearing your religious habit."

"No, Tato," I say.

He must understand, for that is all he says. We talk. About the family, about my sisters who are all married and with their own homes now, about Edo still with yellow fever in the hospital in Bratislava, but Tato says he has word that he is better now.

I smile a little at him. "Are you still drinking your wine, Tato?"

He smiles a little, too. "Yes, Cilka. Not so many different kinds of wine, but I still drink it. I drink wine until I die."

His hair is still dark on top—but there is a change in him much more than the change of age. "Tell me how you have been, Tato."

"Not bad, Cilka," he says, and tries to brighten a little, but I know it is not in him. "Not bad, and I still go to the fields." He pauses. "The only thing is that I can't seem to sleep very much at night. One or two hours at the most, and then I wake up. And think."

I know what it is he thinks.

"Cilka," he says, "do you see the big difference in people I see lately? Or is it just that I am an old man?"

"No, Tato," I say, "it is not that. The difference is there."

"It used to be," he says, "that whenever three or four of us Slovaks got together, we would start singing. No matter

## *Good-bye to Tato*

where it was! In the fields, on the street, anywhere. No matter how tired we were, three or four of us met, and we would start singing. But now . . . people don't sing now."

"No, Tato; they don't sing." And I remember his great voice singing when I was a child.

"It's so quiet," he says. "Nobody sings."

I know I must not stay long. I cannot stand to stay and look at him so broken, my Tato broken by what is happening around us. And also it is not safe for anybody with me here. I stay only fifteen minutes altogether, and most of that is gone before I have the courage to tell him I am leaving.

"What did you say?" he says.

"I have to be leaving soon, Tato," I say.

"Leaving?" my father says. "You have just come. And it is past midnight."

"Tato," I say quickly, "Daddy. I am leaving the country."

He looks at me, my Tato does, and he doesn't understand. He is all bewildered. So I tell him again, how I must go because it is not safe for me any longer in our country.

And then it all comes over him, like a kind of wave across his face, and I see tears dropping down on his nightshirt. His hands reach out towards me across the kitchen table, those old hands rough as oak bark from the fields. But the hands stop, held there . . . then drop on the table.

"*Dcerka Moja*," he says like some kind of gasping. "My daughter. Cilka. My daughter so close to me."

Then he says, "When do you come back?"

"*Nikdy*, Tato. Never."

And he weeps—I think I can almost hear the soft tears on the nightshirt—and says over and over, "*Dcerka Moja, Dcerka Moja*." Then he says, "Will you tell Mamicka? She is asleep."

### *I Flee from the Communists*

"No," I say. "You tell her in the morning, Tato. But I will go in and see her."

And I take the lamp in and look at my Mamicka. She has been crippled a long time now, and she is a very small dear thing all asleep. I sit on the edge of the bed and I kiss her to wake her up. Her hands feel over my face and the words come out of her like moans, happy. I look at her once more—my last look, for she died on 16 April 1954, after I had got safely to the United States. But before she died, she sent me a last message, "I am happy about you, that you will be living in peace from now on."

Now in the bedroom I tell my Mamicka nothing of what I am about to do, but tuck her in and leave and go back to the kitchen.

"Good-bye, Tato. Pray for me."

"*Boh s tebou*, Cilka," he says. "God go with you."

"God go with you, Tato," I repeat, and pull away and leave, hurrying now.

Out in the back yard I look back, and he is standing in the door with the lantern. May God forgive those, not knowing what they do, who to-day take the parents and the children apart.

## 16

### FLIRTATION ON A TRAIN

NEXT day at the farmhouse I am visited by a man in a policemanlike green uniform, and he is Father Filip. He does a work for which he would be hanged almost within

### *Flirtation on a Train*

hours if caught, for he is a permanent member of the underground, like Father Jano, and stays behind getting people out. He has a lean face and a lanky body and large eyes that look all through you. For a while he, instructs me, not in things religious, but very firmly.

"You will have strange leaders," he says. "But do always as you are told. Never ask anyone his name. Nor where you are. Nor where you are going. Ask absolutely nothing. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

"It is all very dangerous. Are you prepared?"

"Yes, Father."

"Take a good look at me," he says.

"Yes, Father."

"And do not call me Father."

"Yes," I say, and I look and I memorize him.

"Now you know me," he says. "You will go to X tomorrow, Sunday, and there get a train that leaves at five in the afternoon for W."

He gives me instructions for meeting him and then he says. "Do not miss that train. If you miss that train, no one will ever come for you again."

He starts to leave, then he turns and says, "And bring some bread and some meat with you."

That last night I spend sewing my picture of Saint Joseph inside my coat near the hem of it. And I pack the bag I am taking and put in it: a change of underwear, a pair of shoes, two handkerchiefs, my flannel nightshirt Anicka had brought me from the hospital, the ski trousers, aspirin, iodine, cotton, bandages, and a piece of rubber for a tourniquet, all in case someone gets hurt on this kind of journey, a

## *I Flee from the Communists*

lemon and the meat and bread Father Filip had ordered. I hesitate a second—then I put in also my rosary, my Cross, my prayer book. I know what the grapes-and-walnuts man said is true about these things being the best set of identifying documents possible for me, but I cannot leave them, they are a part of me. And besides, I think, the Cross and the large rosary will prove to whatever new convent I go to that I am truly a sister.

I have got word to Anicka that I am leaving. Sunday morning she comes to see me for the last time. We sit in Valera's living-room, talking.

"Sister," she says, "it is very hard to say good-bye to you. It is a terrible thing to be driven from one's home, where one's people have lived for hundreds of years. But I am glad you are leaving this tormented country. You should have done it long ago."

"I hope I may be able to repay you some day for all you've done, Anicka . . ." Suddenly I am on my knees at this young girl's feet, holding her around the knees and sobbing into her lap. "I would be in jail or dead without you. It is you who made all this hiding possible. I'll never forget that as long as I live. Anicka, tell me . . . why did you risk your life so many times for me?"

I feel her hand stroking my hair, tenderly as a Mamicka's hand. She is much younger than I, but now I feel it is I who am the young one. She holds my face and smiles at me.

"Sister, I just happened to be there," she says, and she pulls me to my feet.

We go to the door. We hold each other one last time.

"Good luck in the crossing," she says. "I'll pray for you."

And she is gone down the road, across the light snow



### *Flirtation on a Train*

covering it. Her blonde hair lifts and streams out in the wind. Just like Anicka, I think—she never wears anything on her head. I feel the shaking sobs coming again, and I turn back quickly into the house.

Then the couple of hours before I must leave myself are gone, and I have to say another good-bye to Valera and the little girl Hanka.

"My golden aunt, my golden aunt!" Hanka keeps crying, and holding on to me. "Don't go away!"

I have never told her I am crossing the border, only that I am going to another place. But little girls have thin ears.

"You're leaving the country!" she says, looking up at me accusingly, as if somehow I was personally deserting her.

"Yes, darling," I tell her. "I have to."

"But Golden Auntie!" she says. "Why do you have to? You're not doing badly here—are you? You've got a place to eat, and sleep . . ."

"Dear one, I have loved it here," I say, "but I can't stay here any longer. Someday you'll understand."

Actually I think she understands already.

"Pray for me, my little darling," I say. "When I get to the other side, I'll send you something."

I hate good-byes, so I hurry. Also, I am afraid that if I do not get away quickly, I will not go at all, for the series of good-byes—first to my parents, then to Anicka, now to these two dear ones—are tearing me apart and making it very difficult for me to leave my country. Quickly I thank Valera for all she has done, kiss them both, and am gone.

I walk down the road. Then I turn and look back. The house seems a tiny refuge set in vast lonely fields. Valera and Hanka are standing in the doorway, the mother holding

her little daughter's hand. I wave. Valera waves. I wait a moment. Then Hanka's little hand comes up, uncertainly, and waves, too.

I turn and walk very fast now across the snowy road. I dare not look back again.

To get the train to W, I have to first take a train thirty-five miles to X, the city where I went to school under the nuns and where the decision was made inside me to be one myself, and where now I come carrying over my shoulder a black bag with a rope through it, and in it all in the world I am taking with me.

In X I am in great fear of recognition, for here I know many people. I go to the station at about four-forty, not wanting to get there too early for fear of seeing people, but also being scared I may miss Father Filip if I go too late.

In the station I walk around looking for Father Filip. I do not see him anywhere.

Then it is four-fifty, and I am beginning to get worried. I go quickly all over the station once more. It is crowded with hundreds of people—there is always much travelling in my country on Sunday, which is why, in escaping or hiding, you almost always do your travelling on Sunday if possible. I make my way through all the people and into the big, glassed-in cafeteria at one end. Father Filip is not there. I look under the glass awnings. He is not there. I go out on the veranda where there is a steel fence between you and the tracks. He is not there. I come back inside and I go right through the station once more and do not see him. I look up at the big station clock. It is four fifty-five.

Now a kind of frenzy comes over me. For I hear Father

### *Flirtation on a Train*

Filip's words in my mind like a roar. "If you miss that train, no one will ever come for you again."

I seem to start shaking inside, and I think I am going out of my mind. And I start to pray.

"Saint Joseph," I pray, "I'm ready, I want to go away, you told me yourself to go, and now I'm standing here without any help. After helping me all this way, are you going to leave me now, just here towards the last of it? Saint Joseph! Just this time you help me, just this one time, and I'm not going to bother you any more. I want to get away, and I don't know what to do!"

Suddenly I realize that people are staring at me. I realize that I have been yelling my prayer out loud. I must have thought that Saint Joseph wouldn't hear me if I whispered, that I had to yell to him.

That is one of my worst moments of terror. I am sick with terror, with the fear of discovery from having yelled out loud and with the feeling of being left alone, no Father Filip anywhere. I can only guess wildly that he must have been caught or that even he, suspicious as you become under the Communists with so many informers everywhere in so many disguises, is part of a plan to trap me. I sway and think I will faint cold on the station floor.

Then it is as if a ray from heaven falls through the high ceiling of the station and inside me and speaks to me: "Go into the train and take a ticket to the nearest station. Look through the train. If you don't see Father Filip, take the next train back and plan from there."

I run out onto the platform and up to the steel fence and ask the ticket collector what time the train for W is leaving.

"Now, this minute," he says, and I jump on just as it begins to move.

### *I Flee from the Communists*

I walk through the first coach and see nobody. Then I go into the second coach, and there is Father Filip, wearing the green police uniform like a very honest Communist, and he is very, very angry.

"Where you been, Grandma?" he whispers very angrily to me. "*Baba*."

"I thought you told me to meet you in the station," I say.

"The train, I said the train," he says. "From now on you pay attention. Buy a ticket to Z," he whispers. "And sit down here. I'm going for my friend."

I am so happy to be on the train that I do not mind his anger in the slightest. I sit down where there are two wooden seats, and when the ticket collector comes, I buy my ticket to Z. Then I can see Father Filip coming down the gangway with another man.

It is Father Jano! I guess then and learn for sure shortly that he is crossing the border, too. I am glad there will be one person at least that I know. Now he is wearing worker's clothes, a cap pulled down over his eyes, and no one in all the world could have told the two priests were two priests. And I am truly feeling better now to be among friends.

Father Filip introduces Father Jano as if I didn't know him, by our false identifications.

"This is Terezia Horska I just met," Father Filip says, using the name I took soon after leaving the hospital.

The two priests sit down opposite me and pull up a little folding table from between the seats. Father Filip pulls out a bottle of home-made white wine and in a loud voice says: "Auntie, haven't you got a piece of bread and a hunk of meat to go with this wine?" "Auntie" is what any married woman is called in Slovakia.

*Flirtation on a Train .*

So I take out my bread and meat. The ticket collector walks by, and Father Filip and Father Jano buy tickets to Y, which is a station three stops this side of Z. Then Father Filip invites the ticket collector to join us. He opens the wine, and the two priests and the ticket collector pass it round, and we all eat my bread and smoked ham, but I take no wine, remembering the effect wine has on me from the one time I drank some of Tato's in the fields. The two priests act all the time as if they have just picked me up and start to flirt with me.

"Are you married, Auntie?" Father Jano asks.

"Yes," I say. "And I have five children."

"Have a drink," Father Filip says, and holds the bottle towards me.

"I don't drink," I say sharply. "Isn't it enough if my husband is drinking? Who would feed the five children if both of us were drinking?"

"Auntie is a good woman," Father Filip says. "Don't you agree that Auntie is a good woman, Collector?"

"Ho, ho, a good woman," Father Jano laughs.

"Ho, ho, ho, a good woman," the ticket collector laughs as if this is the funniest thing he has ever heard in all his life.

"Where are you going, Auntie?" Father Jano says.

"To Z," I say. "Who cares?"

"Well, we are going to Y," Father Filip says.

"To a dance," Father Jano says, and he takes a drink of the wine and leans forward, as if a little drunkenly. "You go with ush, huh, Auntie?"

"And what is the husband going to say," I say haughtily, "if I don't come with this train?"

"You just tell him you missed the train," Father Filip says.

### *I Flee from the Communists*

The ticket collector starts laughing very noisily, watching to see what will happen. Some of the other passengers are starting to laugh, too.

"Well, I'm not going with you," I say. "The children are waiting for me. Besides—there's my husband . . . whatever would I tell my husband?"

"There's another train arrives at Z at eleven-thirty," Father Filip says. "Am I not right, Collector? Tell husband you missed this train."

So I act as if to be persuaded, like a lady normally does. When the station of Y comes, Father Filip and Father Jano put their things together and get up.

"Come on, Auntie, come on! Husband won't care."

Still I wait. The train is stopped now. They start down the gangway.

"Come on, come on, Auntie!" Father Jano yells back.

"You won't be sorry if you have a few dances with us," Father Filip says.

They are almost at the door. The ticket collector is watching, and many of the passengers. Suddenly I get up and go after them. The ticket collector and all the passengers let out great laughs, and the ticket collector, as the train leaves, leans out laughing fit to burst his lungs and yelling to us on the platform. "You got her! Finally you got her!"

Father Filip, Father Jano, and I stand on the platform until the train pulls out. Suddenly Father Filip taps me on the shoulder and speaks sternly.

"You did very well. From now on, you pray.

And we all three cross ourselves.

## INTO A LOCKED KITCHEN

FROM the platform of the station Father Filip leads us out into a thicket, a small wood, and tells us to wait there—he has to meet two more trains with more who are going with us. Father Jano and I sit among the trees. It is very cold in the January night, with the ground all frozen. We wait two long hours until Father Filip brings first two young men, then later on two more young men, all four of them students, for the priesthood. They are all Salesians, like Father Jano. Then Father Filip goes away once more and returns with a tall man carrying binoculars who will for a while be our leader. He is perhaps fifty, and he talks less than almost any man I ever knew in my whole life. I learn later that Father Filip paid 20,000 crowns for each of us to this man for the journey across the river, and the price has gone up a little, I see, since I did it at the hospital.

Now, before we go, we all kneel, the six of us, there in the dark woods on the frozen ground, and receive from Father Filip the priestly blessing and farewell.

• “God bless you and be with you on all your crossings and all your roads.”

We stand up and start, following the binoculars leader through the black woods. I can hear our steps squeaking fearfully in the snow. The leader never says one word, and I do as I have been told, asking no questions. Single file we

### *I.Flee from the Communists*

go, me behind the leader, Father Jano behind me, then the four students.

The binoculars leader keeps us in the woods and the fields, staying away from the towns and even the farmhouses. From time to time I pat Saint Joseph through my coat and under my breath talk to him and sometimes, in a whisper, to Father Jano right behind.

"How bad it is we have to run away from our own country," I say. "In the dark. Like the worst criminal."

"Some day God will bring us back to our own country," Father Jano says. "A new country from now, that is to say, the old country."

We don't know the leader. Don't know where we are. Don't know for sure where we are going. The unknowingness is a terrible thing.

"We are led like cattle to the slaughter," I whisper to Father Jano. "We could be killed and no one would ever know it. We are in strange hands."

"We are in the hands of God," he says. He has great faith, more than I have. I pat Saint Joseph through my coat.

"Have some lemon, Father," I say.

"Sh-sh," the leader says. It is the one sound he has made, and I am glad to learn he has a tongue. I cut the lemon I am carrying with a pocketknife, which is something I have always carried from the time I became a nun, like all the sisters, to peel things, cut a piece of a branch, or open letters, and give Father Jano half.

We walk along sucking on the lemon, and I feel a little better. In my country the people like to suck something sour like the lemon, which is why I take it. I get a great longing to stop and get my rosary which is in my bag. But



there is certainly no time for anything like that. So now and then I take a deep breath and repeat, all silently, "Our Saviour, make the chance for us so we can pass over."

From time to time we stop, and the binoculars leader looks into the night with his binoculars. We don't know which way is north, south, east or west.

And so we come after perhaps three hours and six or eight miles through the woods and the fields, dark and cold, to a grove of trees. From here we can see in the distance the lights of a small town we never learn the name of. The leader motions us to wait in the shadows of the trees. He goes ahead alone.

I think now that we are at the border. I think that the binoculars leader has gone ahead to pay off the guard and that we will then just walk over the border. I think, "It isn't too difficult at all to get over the border. It's much easier than I thought."

This foolish thinking shows how little I knew about it then. But the binoculars leader tells us nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

In about fifteen minutes he is approaching us through the dark. He gives us a slight whistle to follow him. We follow him into the yard of a house on the edge of the town. A woman holding a big collie dog by the collar lets us in the back door. Inside it is pitch dark until the woman strikes a match, lights a coal-oil lamp, and we see we are in a kitchen. The binoculars leader leaves us, and we are locked in the kitchen, locked off from the rest of the house, because, I imagine, the people are taking no chances on us wandering around and being seen.

The kitchen is cold and damp and dark with a cement

*•I Flee from the Communists*

floor. It has one tiny window opening into the yard, but now with the blind down. In one corner is a wood stove.

We make a fire in the stove. Huddled around it, we pass the rest of the night. There is a bed in the kitchen, but no one sleeps, from too much nervousness. Nor is there much talking that night. The kitchen is like a locked cage. Somehow in a locked cage you don't talk much at night.

In the morning the woman brings us warm milk, straight from the cow, and bread. Then she leaves. For this kind of journey, I decide, and to keep warmer, I will change from my dress to my ski trousers, which I go into a little storage room by the kitchen and do. When I come back, the seminarians joke with me about the trousers, but later in Austria, when we are waiting in the camp to be cleared, they are glad all right that I have them because I loan them to whoever is having his repaired. My trousers then become known among the seminarians as "the community trousers".

All day long we stay in that house, still locked in the kitchen, the blinds down.

It is the longest single day I have ever spent.

One thing that makes it long is not knowing where I am. It is a very strange sensation, not to know where you are. No matter how bad things get, you can at least usually say, "I am in Bratislava," or, "I am in Vienna," or, "I am in New York," where I was later. It is very reassuring to know where you are. It is a very unsettling thing not to know where you are.

The favourite expression that day in the kitchen is, "I wonder where we are." It must have been said a hundred times, by all of us.

The favourite activity that day is going over and peeping

### *Into a Locked Kitchen*

out of the window blind. This tells us only that there is a back yard behind with the big collie tied to a tree there, and beyond that, woods. The second favourite thing is to go over and try the door, though we know it is locked. But everyone tries it a dozen times.

The favourite sound for which one listens that day is the turning of a key in that door and someone to enter and tell us something.

Just to be told where we are would be a blessing. It is understandable we aren't, for this is a house of the underground, and the fewer who know where it is, the longer it will remain so. But I think the greatest torture would be to put six people in a room somewhere and not tell them where they are, and leave them there. It would make no difference if it were a king's parlour, though our room happens to be far from that. Being there long enough would probably break them all out screaming. Our nerves are very thin in just one day of it, even though we have something in common—the work we have chosen for our lives. Even more, both of our orders have to do with the young. I take them when they are just little and teach them, and the Salesians work with them when they get a little older.

Having this work in common is our greatest help that day, for whatever face one looks into in that room, one could say. "He is one who has turned his life to religion," or at least made the decision to, as in the case of the seminarians. One could look at any face and say, "Because he has turned his life there, he must be in this locked room, must make this dark journey. He is just like me."

So we turn to what we have in common—we pray. We kneel, the six of us there in that kitchen, and we pray our

### *I Flee from the Communists*

own prayers. I pray to Saint Joseph, and each prays to whom he must turn in his hour of the big shadow.

I look around at my companions for the crossing. The priesthood students are variously between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, I would guess. How terrible, I think, just to get started in the priesthood, then to have to flee. Most of them are very good-natured, but they all look thin—they have been months in hiding. One of them has a bad cold and a fever. I decide that he must spend this day in bed and get over it, for fever will not help him in what is ahead. I give him some aspirin. Then I take my flannel nightshirt, which has broad green stripes, out of my bag and make him put it on, though this takes some doing.

"Sister," he says, "I will not sleep in a nun's nightshirt. This may be a perilous journey, but, it is not that perilous."

I tell him to be quiet and in a way, I suppose, I use my status to impress him. After all, he is only a seminarian, and I am a nun.

I push the nightshirt into his hands. "Now do as you are told," I say sharply. "Go into the storage room and put this on. There is nothing like a flannel nightshirt to cure a cold-fever."

He protests, but finally he goes into the storage room. When he comes back he is very embarrassed wearing a nun's nightshirt. The other seminarians burst out laughing. He jumps angrily into the bed and turns with his back to us.

The seminarian is peeved, but by that night he feels a lot better. For he sweats a lot. There is nothing, as I say, like a flannel nightshirt for curing the cold-fever.

Another of the seminarians is making his second try for the border. This one had been with Father Matej when the

### *Into a Locked Kitchen*

two of them and some twenty other priests tried to swim the Morava wearing lifebelts, but were turned back by the rough, swollen river.

"I hope it is not that rough when we go this time," he says.

This is a danger we hadn't thought of, and I am not able to think of it long, for the seminarian is going on, telling what happened that night to Father Matej's party when most of the priests were caught as they came back through the fields. How that happened I now learn for the first time.

"When we were coming back after trying to swim it," the priesthood student tells us, "some of the country people saw us. They thought we were parachutists, I was told later, and called the police. We were going single file down a road when the police pounced on us. Father Matej and I were at the rear of the column, so we got away into a cemetery. We hid all night behind the mounds." (In Slovakia the cemetery is not flat, but the earth from digging the grave is piled on top of the coffin, so that every grave has the shape of a coffin on top of it.) "I thought we would freeze to death, we were so wet and cold from trying to swim the river. Next morning we slipped off."

The seminarian looks around at all of us listening closely to this story of a border crossing that failed.

"I won't tell you everything we went through that night at the border," the student says, "or you will be afraid to try it this time."

He immediately realizes that is a bad thing to say. "I'm sorry," he says quickly. "It isn't really too . . ."

"Sister," Father Jano changes the subject hurriedly, "I am

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very hungry. You're a woman. Why don't you do what a woman is supposed to do, and cook us something?"

"And out of what?" I snap as he looks knowingly at me. "I'm not Our Holy Saviour, Father. I can't work miracles. Can I make wine out of water? Or smoked ham out of air?"

The seminarians laugh, and the moment of fear passes. I start snooping around. And, lo, in the storeroom I find a few potatoes. They look pretty ancient, but they are food. So I cook them in the stove and we sit around eating them, and feel considerably better. To be hungry and in fear at the same time is a trial. The potatoes, which are our only food that day, help make an assault on this. Even an old potato in the stomach is better than epace.

As a priest, and us being seminarians and a nun, we all turned naturally to Father Jano. He is noble. He gives us courage by not showing fear himself. He tries to cheer us up. He isn't telling jokes at all. But he manages to show in himself that he is not disastrously worried or afraid.

We keep asking him questions, and late that night especially, when the blackness seems to reach out and grasp us and still no one comes. It is nearly midnight and we are talking.

"Isn't it likely," I say "that God will not allow that after all we have been through that the whole thing would end up with all of us in a police station?"

"Everything is possible," Father Jano says, "for it is true that the hair by which we are hanging on is not the strongest hair in the world. But we do have that hair, and if it holds up, we will be able to make it and everything will be all right."

"If God were going to give us over to the police," I continue, "it seems that it would have been simpler for

Him to have done it long ago, rather than to bring us through all this and then at the end of it hand us over to the ones in green uniforms saying, 'Heŕe, Comrades. You take them.' "

"There is reason in that," Father Jano agrees. "In any case, of the two choices we have—to stay in the kind of country our country is now or to attempt to go where there is fresh air . . . well, I will take my chances on the fresh air attempt. I have had all the Communist air I intend to breathe in my life. Who wants to spend his life breathing a manure heap?"

"It is too bad," I say, "that when they were dividing Austria up after the war the Americans didn't put their zone right at the Morava River, on the Slovak border. Then it would be easier to get across."

"No, it's a good thing they didn't," says Father Jano, smiling. "For then all Slovakia would go across, there would be no more Slovaks left in Slovakia, and the Russians would all come right in and take the whole thing, so there would be no Slovaks left to get it back some day."

I notice that the seminarian who was with Father Matej has been watching me. Finally he says what he has been wanting to say.

"Sister," says the seminarian, "I saw when you opened your bag that you have bandages."

"Bandages are always nice to have with one," I say uneasily, "when one is going somewhere."

"Father." That seminarian cannot let it go. "Sister has the necessary things for the body. Have you the necessary things for the soul?"

He means the holy oils with which a priest anoints a person about to die.

"I have nothing," Father Jano says. "But it isn't necessary."

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As in war, allowances are made, and it is not necessary for a priest to have the holy oils at these times."

That seminarian, though he cannot stay off it, says what all of us are thinking, despite all fronts. We are trembling, inside, just as if we are about to die.

Just then we hear the collie start barking loudly. We jump. Then we hear a key turning in the door. Then the door opens.

There stands the binoculars leader. He comes in, and behind him, one after the other until I think there will be no end of them, comes a whole flock—eleven persons, also fleeing.

The one-way traffic, I think, is getting considerable.

Six of them are seminarians. The other five are a family of mother, father, the mother's brother—and two children.

The children are beautiful. The girl, Katka, about four years old, wears a little fur coat and little pants worn under her dress like leggings and a kerchief, out from which falls a tumble of chestnut curls—a tiny angel she is. And the boy, Misko, about seven, wears a heavy three-quarter coat and a heavy woollen cap pulled away down over his ears. They look up wide-eyed and innocent, and as wondering as the fawns of the forest. It gives a pain in the heart to look at them and to think that two such little children are going on this kind of journey.

And into this feeling slowly creeps, I think in every grown-up person in that room, the knowledge of the danger they bring with them to our crossing. For children, in the dark night, cry out.

No one asks questions of anyone. But it is plain to see from their dress that the family are city people, the mother



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wearing a fur coat. She is about thirty, and a little later she volunteers to me that she has a mother in the United States who has been trying to persuade her to leave. She is especially tired because they have journeyed from far east in Slovakia. As soon as she gets in the house she faints.

We put her on the kitchen bed and I wash her in cool water and when she comes to she says, "If I had known it was such a hard way, I would never have come."

"We will help you, Mamicka," I say, "and with the children. Have faith."

"Who are you? she says.

"I am a nun, Mamicka."

She looks at the way I am dressed, and for the first time smiles a little. "You know something, Sestricka? It is good luck to have a nun along."

Now there are children, I can get my mind off myself a little and help care for them. They are very good children. That night the mother, the two children, and I are given the bed in the kitchen, and the others take turns sleeping on a bed in the next room, which because of so many people has now been opened up.

In ours we sit up quite a long time on the bed. The mother introduces me formally to her children.

"She is a nun," she tells her children. "She is the one who would have taught you in school—before. You call her 'Sister'."

This introduction and explanation are necessary because by then the children in Slovakia see few nuns, most of the nuns being in factories or concentration camps and almost the only other nuns being those in hospitals, and these seldom going out these days.

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"She's a nun," the mother says, and the children look at me as at a strange creature.

Suddenly I feel a great rush of anger through me that it should be so, that *they* should have made us strange to children. At that moment I make a resolve: "If I am successful in being the first nun out," I promise myself, "I'll be the first one back when Slovakia is liberated, and I'll establish a convent there."

The children look at me strangely and begin asking questions. And slowly I explain to them what a nun is, what she does, and how she dresses—that ordinarily she does not wear the clothes I am now wearing.

It seems so unreal that I have to tell them all this.

I get the children ready for bed and comb Katka's curls. The children are restless and a little frightened in that strange house. So as we sit on the bed I start telling them bedtime stories. I tell them some of the stories I used to hear from my Tato. And very softly I sing them some of Tato's songs:

Under our window flows the water,  
Little girl, please water my horse.  
No, I won't water him,  
Because I'm scared of him,  
Because I'm too small.

I tell them a story about a mother with two children: "They were very poor, the mother, Jurko and Pavlina. They lived all alone in a poor house on the edge of the woods, and the mother worked very hard, washing clothes and cleaning houses for rich people. From the few haliers she got, she bought them food and clothes. Sometimes for

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breakfast they had only roast potatoes to eat, and their clothes were very plain. But the children were satisfied, even if they were poor. The main thing that counted for them was their sweet mother. And every night she prayed for them and left them in the blessing of God.

"One day, in the winter, the mother caught a bad cold at work. She started to cough and have pains in her chest. She tried to go to work, but some days she would have to stay home. She didn't go to a doctor, for she had no money to pay one.

"It was getting near to Christmas. Jurko and little Pavlina used to sit together and talk about little Jesus, how, poor He used to be, how He was born in a barn in a manger, and they knew that Jesus loved small children. They were wondering if Jesus was going to bring them something this Christmas, or if He would forget, and if He didn't forget, whether He could even find His way to their house. For their house was a good way from town, and all the roads were covered with snow.

"Finally came the day of Christmas Eve, the happiest day for all the children in the world. But this Christmas Eve little Jurko and little Pavlina were not happy. They were worried and sad because their mother had been a whole solid week in bed and had eaten almost nothing. It came towards evening. Looking out of the window, Jurko and Pavlina decided to go out into the woods to watch Jesus when He came down on the golden ladder. They weren't going to ask Him for any presents. They were just going to ask Him to make their sick mother well, because the mother is the dearest one before anyone else.

"But first they went in to see their mother. She looked

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fast asleep, and when they felt her hand, it was cold. They asked her if she was cold. She didn't answer, and Jurko said 'Mamicka must be feeling better. She's sleeping. We'd better not wake her up. Let's go to the woods and watch Jesus come down the ladder.'

"So they went out in their poor clothes and their shoes full of holes. It was very cold, and the snow was coming down fast, but they didn't care. They just wanted to see Jesus on the golden ladder. So they found a balsam tree and sat under it waiting for Him. They sat close to each other, and they felt warm and fell asleep. They dreamed of how the angel came on a golden sleigh with four deer pulling it. And the angel asked them to get on the sleigh, for he was going to take them to a place more beautiful than any they had ever seen in their whole lives.

"So they got in the sleigh. The angel spoke to the deer. Then slowly the sleigh began to rise above the ground. And the sleigh came to the gates of heaven, and the gates opened to them and they went right in, sleigh, deer, and all.

"The sleigh stopped, and Jurko and Pavlina looked up and saw Jesus sitting on the throne and around Him millions of people. And among them they saw their mother. And they went up to her and said, 'Oh, dear sweet mother, what is this wonderful place we have come to?'

" 'You have come to heaven, dear ones,' their mother said. 'And we're going to stay here for ever, and no one will ever chase us out.'

"And she put her arms around them, and they hugged each other.

"In the morning the people found the dead mother in the house and they followed a trail into the woods and found the

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frozen children. But all the time they were really up in heaven."

Katka looks up with big eyes at me. "Sister," she says, "if Jurko and Pavlina had known where I live and come to where I live, I would give them my clothes and lots of toys."

"I never heard a story like that in school," Misko says. "Did it happen?"

I smile. "Oh, yes, it happened," I say.

The children crawl under the blanket. "I want my doll," Katka says.

Her mother tells me to open a small leather travelling bag she has brought along. I do, and lift out a doll that is almost a copy of Katka. It has a pink bow in its chestnut hair, a wide pink skirt, and a pink short-sleeved blouse and opens and closes its eyes and says, "Mama." It is a full fourteen inches high. I think the Mamicka must be a very good Mamicka to carry a doll that size for her little girl on this kind of journey.

Katka cuddles the doll to her, and she and Misko lie down by their mother. Then I sing them to sleep with a cradle song.

Rockabye, my child, sleep quietly, sweetly,  
Close your little eyes.  
While your mother rocks you,  
Sleep, my child, sleep.  
Have pleasant dreams,  
Angels will be standing next to you  
And talking to you about heaven . . .  
Sleep, my child, sleep sweetly . . .

As they doze off, I lie down by the three of them. It is not until I am almost asleep myself that I suddenly remem-

ber what is ahead. I sit up with a start. Then I hear Katka whimpering a little. I lie down again by her and put my arm around her and try to lie very quiet. But for the rest of the night I sleep very little.

## 18

### OUR LEADER, BIG JO JO

NOBODY is feeling very bright, all locked in that strange house of the underground in a town we don't even know the name of or where it is. But we feel better when someone comes next morning.

The one who comes is Big Jo Jo.

Big Jo Jo is to be our leader in the attempt to cross the border. We call him that to distinguish him from the binoculars leader, who is also named Jozef, but is number two. We now call this one Little Jo Jo, though actually he is taller, being very tall and lean, while Big Jo Jo is about five feet nine inches tall, and stocky and broad-shouldered. A very good omen, having a leader by the name of Jozef, and especially two of them, though this is not strange, for Jozef is the favourite name for the male child in Slovakia, and hardly a house does not have one.

The moment Big Jo Jo comes in the room, you know he is the number one leader. I trust him more than I trust anyone else although he looks like a gangster. He smiles and

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shrugs and seems afraid of nothing and all happy-go-lucky, taking this as if it is a tram ride across Bratislava. He is about thirty-five. He is missing one finger, the finger next to the little finger on his right hand. He wears a cap which he always keeps on, laced hunting boots with his trousers tucked in them, and a leather coat with a Luger pistol sticking out of the pocket.

I feel much better when this one shows up.

He steps into the room and stands looking at us, his legs apart a little. Then he takes out a handful of loose ammunition from the other pocket of the leather jacket and shakes it in his hand like dice. His first words are a big roar from way down in his throat. "Is there anything to drink here?"

"Nic," someone says. "Nothing."

He puts his hands on his hips and stands looking at all the students for the priesthood.

"Nothing to drink!" he roars. "What kind of men are you?"

When he finds out who I am, he looks at me a moment.

"I never saw a nun in trousers before."

Once he overhears me talking to the lady of the house, telling her how brave I think she is to take us all in and hide us like this. He takes me aside.

"Sister," he says. "Why are you so stupid? Never tell a person he or she is brave. Pretty soon that person starts looking in the mirror and saying 'I am too brave,' and stops hiding people."

All day long again we are in the house, locked in. The day is passed checking the things that are to try to take us across that night, spreading them all out in the kitchen. Little Jo Jo takes out a rubber boat from a big bag and blows

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it up with a pump. In the kitchen it seems like a big boat, but I think of the great Morava and how it will seem when we cast off on it.

Big Jo Jo goes all over the rubber boat with his hands checking it. He has very big, hairy and rough hands, but they are as soft and careful as a woman's going over that boat. Every second I admire him more, for he is so cool, and he gives you courage just to be near him. Then Big Jo Jo pays out two large coils of clothesline, to check them, two coils of 200 yards each and the thickness of a small finger, which we take for a reason you will see. Big Jo Jo then takes his big Luger apart and cleans it. The eyes of the seminarians watch and grow big.

Once someone dares ask him what town he comes from.

Big Jo Jo stops cleaning the pistol and turns and looks at that person a long, long time. Then he says very slowly: "The town of Purgatory, which is where you go quick if you ask me a second question."

The gruffness is not too unkind, but even so, there is reason for it, for his work is the most dangerous of all, and he makes a regular business of taking people across the border. Such a man naturally does not go around telling his life story.

From time to time during the day he talks to us, feeding us information which he considers will be useful to us either during our journey or after it.

"You must be very careful about whom you trust," he tells us once. "There is no business in the world that has more traps in it than smuggling people across. Let me tell you one story."

He tells us a story about a Slovak girl who was in Austria,



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having got across the border. One day the girl came to Slovak priest in Austria who took people across regularly.

"I have an old mother in Slovakia," she told the priest. "When I left, I didn't even say good-bye to her, I had to go in such a hurry. Now I get a letter that she is very ill and about to die. I would like to see her once more."

The priest was suspicious. "You should be glad you got across once," he said, "and should stay."

The girl started sobbing. "I don't care what happens to me. I have such a terrible feeling in my heart because I didn't say good-bye to my mother. Now she is going to die. Please . . . please take me back so I can see her once more before she dies."

Finally the priest gave in. "All right. If you're not afraid, I'll take you back across and bring you over again."

So the next time he was going back, the priest took the girl with him. They arranged that after she visited her mother—and after the priest had gone to visit his family—they would meet in a little town near the border in a certain house kept by a woman in the underground, and from there they would go back across again. The priest described the girl to the woman and told her to let the girl in when she came.

"She is very brave," the priest told the woman of the underground. "She loves her mother so much, she doesn't care what happens to herself as long as she sees her mother again."

The priest went off to see his relatives, then came back to the underground house. The girl wasn't there, and he waited for her. That night someone came, but it was not the girl. It was the police. They captured the priest, the

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woman who kept the underground house, the woman's husband, and a student who was waiting for the priest to take him across.

"What happened then," Big Jo Jo says, "was that the woman, her husband, and the student got prison sentences. The priest was sent to the gallows."

Jo Jo puts his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. "The moral of this story," he says, "is, 'Be very careful whom you trust.' There are many of these spies like that girl with her easy tears, ready to deliver people into the hands of the Communists and they will stop at nothing."

Jo Jo takes some loose ammunition from his pocket and shakes it.

"Some of you," he says, "will probably be living in Austria after we cross the border. Possibly you will get letters from relatives or friends here in Slovakia asking the name of someone, some smuggler like myself, who can take them across. In Austria you will have heard the names of many smugglers. Now here you will be in the position of an eleven-month-old baby playing with a machine gun. Let me warn you to be very careful whom you 'recommend' to your relatives and friends, because you may recommend them straight under six feet of earth. To put it plainly, there are even false underground leaders. Let me warn you about one, in particular, in case you should ever run into him in Austria for he is operating now. His name is Bartalsky."

Big Jo Jo rattles his ammunition.

"This man Bartalsky plays a very clever game. He takes small groups across the border. He takes them properly right into the hands of the Americans, so that they are free. Like that he gets a good name and becomes known as a

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smuggler you can trust. He takes small groups, Bartalsky does, only three or four people at a time—and especially he takes people who have not done too much against the Government anyhow, except to happen to be born in Slovakia and who are rather simple, but just want to get across. These days even some very simple people want to get across.”

Jo Jo puts the loose ammunition back in his pocket. “So, having taken them safely across, our friend Bartalsky asks these happy pilgrims, all now madly in love with their saviour Bartalsky, if they know any others who want to do the same thing, and especially if they know any higher-up people like priests and educated people, people who are working actively against the Communists. And pretty often they say, why as a matter of fact they do. So Bartalsky gets these people he has taken across to write to these others still in Slovakia about how safe and beloved is a certain smuggler named Bartalsky and how he took them so safely across. Then also this Bartalsky gets from these he has taken across safely the addresses of other people back here who want to get away, too, and he goes to see them himself. So . . . he gets a big group of them together, maybe twenty-five or thirty, and they are people of a kind the Government would like very much to have. And one night they all start across, our brave Bartalsky in the lead.”

Big Jo Jo takes out his Luger and lovingly blows a fleck of dust off it. “But does Bartalsky take them this time to the Americans as before? The answer, my good people, is”—and Big Jo Jo purses his lips—“No-o. No. He takes this big party right into the hands of the Communist police. He collects his hundred thousand crowns apiece for them from

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the Communists. Then this sweet vulture goes merrily off looking for more victims. He makes a very good living, this Bartalsky."

I think a shudder passes through us all at such evil. Big Jo Jo slides his Luger back in the pocket of his leather jacket.

"The moral of this story is that when you get across, be careful of any perfumed recommendations you send back to your relatives and friends about a good smuggler to take them over. The Austrian woods are crawling with these false underground leaders. That is just a little piece of information for you to have."

I have heard of such men, or Judases, but it makes it much more realistic to hear of one so specifically, and by name. There is never any way entirely around it, for if you want to go across the border, you can learn of someone to take you only by car. There is no guidebook of registered smugglers. You will hear only that "Such-and-Such took So-and-So across," and then perhaps get him to take you. But you never know if you can really trust Such-and-Such. It is awful to think that there are men so evil as to take such trusting people and for pieces of Communist silver to deliver them into their hands. I am glad to get the name of at least one, and I memorize the name, Bartalsky.

Hearing of such a one directly from Big Jo Jo puts us on our guard for later, but also greatly increases our suspicion even now, here. We even look around at each other and wonder, "Can I trust this one? That one?" One of the worst things about the Communists is that they are so treacherous, putting their people in everywhere, that soon you trust no one. Even in this party of ours there might be a Judas, some-

one who had given the Communists the full details of our flight so that we would walk right into their hands. It is a terrible thing, this suspicion and something we feel as we glance around, giving each other almost sly glances.

Late in the afternoon I help get Katka ready. I don't know how you prepare a little four-year-old girl for this kind of trip; so I do the only things I know, which is to make her look pretty. I comb her curls and tie a little yellow ribbon in her hair, and that is her preparation for crossing the border. That and talking with her.

Big Jo Jo has been very worried about the children, for fear noises from them might betray us in the night. So, as I comb her hair, I talk to Katka.

"You must remember not to cry," I say.

"What do I get if I don't?" she says.

"Well, we will write Grandma that you were good and she will buy you all sorts of toys when you get to the United States."

"What if I do cry?"

"Then that means you won't even see Grandma."

She turns around and looks at me, and her mouth puckers a little. "Now let me finish your combing," I say, turning her round. "But you won't cry, will you?"

She doesn't answer. I guess she is thinking about her grandma.

That night we have a last meal of goulash. Then we get ready to leave, which is supposed to be at seven, a little after it is quite dark.

Then the woman of the house looks out of the windows for a check. She comes back to us in the kitchen, where a small lantern is the only light burning in the house. Looking

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at Big Jo Jo she says: "Two policemen are standing on the street."

No one says anything, but, I guess, if they're like me, they think and feel a lot. We look around at each other slyly, with that awful suspicion, that maybe one of us . . .

Big Jo Jo gives a sigh. "I guess everyone can rest a little longer."

But no one rests, that is certain. Big Jo Jo keeps going every few minutes to look out of the front window. Once he comes back and says, "That is a strange one. They just keep standing there."

After an hour of this, one of the longest we spend, he comes back from looking again, and I see he is getting impatient. Later, when I see how everything is timed, I know why.

"We can't wait any longer," he says, taking out his pistol. "Let's get ready."

Just then the woman, who has been watching almost steadily from the window, comes into the kitchen and says, "They have gone."

Big Jo Jo looks at her a moment. Then he puts away his pistol. "We're going, too," he says.

Now Big Jo Jo stands up before us in the kitchen. His cap is cocked back a little on his head, and his Luger bulges from the pocket of his leather jacket.

"Before we go," he says. "I want everyone to understand that I'm the *vodka* (leader). You do as I say. Anyone don't understand that?"

That is one thing everyone understands all right, and nobody speaks.

Big Jo Jo takes out some ammunition from his pockets

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and shakes it like dice. "I am glad to have that so well understood. There is another thing to understand. This trip is no matter of an outing at any point, but there is one point of danger above all others—the dike. Where we will be, if all goes well, four hours from now."

Then he tells us about the dike.

The border where we will try to cross is actually the River Morava which is perhaps a mile beyond the dike. But the dike, being elevated and being ninety miles long, makes a good barrier and is patrolled on top by men and German shepherd dogs as a barrier to the border. Two teams of a man and a dog apiece have a certain section of the dike to patrol. The two teams meet in the centre of their section, each walks to the end of the section, then walks back, and they meet and repeat. The problem will be to wait until the guards are at either end of their beat, then to try to scramble across. Since our time, I hear from my country, they have made a regular no-man's-land of the area around the dike. First, in front of the dike they erected a barbed wire fence which, when touched, flashes a light on the dike. When some still kept getting across, they put up three rows of barbed-wire fences, dug trenches, cleared all underbrush out from around the dike, and stripped the trees between the dike and the river-border, so the guards on the dike could see better. They did all this up after so many people fled or tried to cross the border. But at our time there is no barbed wire. Still the dike is a very formidable barrier. It is the real prison wall to have to break through, as Big Jo Jo now explains to us.

"Our main barrier is the dike," he says. "But there will be some danger after that, going through Red-occupied

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Austria. Some parties have been attacked there. If that happens with us, remember, you are instantly to split up. Like that, some have a chance of being saved. Two weeks ago I had a party of twenty-two, and we were attacked in the Austrian woods. It was a very good party—they split up fast. As a result, out of the twenty-two, a total of ten got away—and got, finally, to Vienna. How they got to Vienna I will instruct you later, so you can do the same thing if it happens with us tonight. The main thing to remember is that the worst thing you can do if attacked is to stay together. In that way you are all sure to be caught. If you split up, some will have a good chance to get away. Is that absolutely clear?

Big Jo Jo waits a moment then speaks again. "There is only one other thing to understand, which is that you are not to expect too much to be alive around the time of the dike. Last week a whole party was caught, and two killed. There is an excellent chance all of us will be dead four hours from now or, what is perhaps worse, be caught. Anyone afraid of being dead or caught had perhaps better stay here, and now is the time to speak up."

He waits, but no one speaks. Everyone is too scared to speak.

"If anyone has anything useless," he says, "now is the time to throw it away. This is not the kind of trip to be carrying spare baggage."

I think of my rosary and my Cross in my bag, which I imagine Big Jo Jo would think useless, all right. But I do not, so I keep my mouth quiet. Later I am scolded for carrying them across, that, as the grapes-and-walnuts man said, they would have identified me instantly. But I believed,



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and do, that the protection they give was worth this chance.

So we make ready to go. But suddenly Big Jo Jo takes his cap off for the first time, revealing a pompadour of thick black hair, and I am very startled to hear this man say, "Let us pray before we go."

Then, just as if he is a priest, he starts the first part of the Lord's prayer, crossing himself, "Our Father Who art in heaven .'. ." and all of us pray silently, then join aloud, just as in church, on the part, "Give us this day our daily bread . . . deliver us from evil . . ." At the end Jo Jo prays, "Our Father in heaven save us on this journey which we are going to start right now amen let's go," and he pops on his cap and opens the back door.

Just before we leave, as the others are picking up their bags, he turns to me.

"Sister, are you afraid?"

"Jo Jo," I say, and this is the first time I call him that, "I am very afraid."

The corners of his mouth smile a little, and he takes out some ammunition and shakes it.

"Sister," he says, "in heaven everyone has a candle, and for some it is short and for some long. But when your candle burns down to the bottom, then is the time you have to go."

And we step out into the night.

Now we start through the wood. We have got just barely into it when we hear the collie dog bark behind us. We look back startled, and see lights like flashlights flashing over the inside of the house of the woman we have just left. We certainly do not stop to find out why, but later, across the border, I get a letter which tells: the dog barking

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and the lights coming on were a big party of policemen raiding the house. The two policemen in front apparently were watching and had gone to get reinforcements for the raid. The letter told how one member of the recent group Jo Jo had taken across, the same in which twelve of twenty-two were captured, had the address of the house tortured out of him by the Communists—he had seen the address on a letter from her son in the army which the lady of the house had left lying on a table. Saint Joseph was surely with us again.

## 19

### THE JOURNEY ACROSS THE DIKE

THE night lies bright on the land, the sweet stars across it, though as yet no moon. So peaceful a night for there to be men and dogs waiting for us on the dike four hours away. Nineteen we are: ten seminarians, one priest, one nun, one civilian family of five, two leaders. Two women, two small children, fifteen men. Hardly a band of brigands. Single file we go through the woods. I am right behind Big Jo Jo because that is where I feel best, and except when I am helping with the children, I stay as close behind him, as I can. Behind me come the other sixteen who are fleeing. Then Little Jo Jo, a very tall man, at the end.

The January ground, which is speckled with snow, has begun to thaw a little, and as we start through a kind of marsh, I can feel water squishing up into my shoes. Then

### *The Journey Across the Dike*

we are through the marsh and going down the furrows of a field. We seem to be making big circles to miss the houses, and see a light now and then, only from afar. The walking through the fields is hard. Harder, though, on the semi-narians carrying the rubber boat, which is heavy, and carrying the two big coils of clothesline. Hardest of all on the little children, who now and then whimper a little. Katka, the men take turns carrying, and much of the time she is asleep in their arms. Misko, two men take by the hands so that he isn't walking much, he is mostly in the air. Big Jo Jo's big worry about the children will be when we get to the dike, where one loud wail and all nineteen of us might be in the hands of the dike patrol. Or to put it personally for him, one cry from them, and presently he would be hanging by a rope. Now and then when we stop, he goes back along the line and says something to them and gives them a piece of sticky candy.

Now we rest in the fields, three hours from the dike, and I talk with the children, asking them not to cry.

"It is only one night, my lovely ones." I tell them. "One night, and when you get on the other side, you go and see Grandma and Grandpa."

The mother's brother starts to light a cigarette and Big Jo Jo tells him brusquely he can't. We get up and start on. Then out comes the full moon. Shining on the fields and glistening off little ridges of snow that cling to the soil and making the country all beautiful now, to be leaving. Where is the pain to compare with leaving one's land, and in such a way? Once we are along a railway track, about two hours from the dike, I think, when we hear a train coming. Big Jo Jo makes us all lie down on our stomachs until it goes by.

### *I Flee from the Communists*

We look up and see the lighted windows. Then we climb up on the tracks and watch for a moment the train flying back towards our homes. There comes a moan from, I think, the mother.

"*Teraz ideme*," Big Jo Jo says roughly. "Let's get going."

We walk on steadily then. It is approaching midnight, and we have walked over three hours when suddenly we see, in the far-off distance and rising up out of the moon-lit fields, the black form of it: the dike.

Jo Jo makes us wait, lying low on the ground, while he takes the binoculars from Little Jo Jo and goes ahead to scout. We lie and look at the great dike, this long and chunky silhouette which spreads itself so quietly across the fields. We think how beyond it lies freedom, and how on it lies death. We look, and we think of the men and the dogs on it.

Then Big Jo Jo is back. From here now he looks for a full minute through his binoculars at the dike, sweeping it. Then he hands the binoculars to Little Jo Jo, who does the same.

Now we move forward again, though now much more slowly than before.

From above, the moon shines down so brightly we can see each other almost to the colour of a person's eyes. More and more we all feel a consciousness of that moon. Surely, we feel, it is impossible under that moon for one person, let alone nineteen, to get across the dike without being seen.

"It's too bright," I hear Big Jo Jo mutter from right in front of me.

I think, "So what can I do about it? Did I make the moon come out?"

## *The Journey Across the Dike*

"That moon is no good," Jo Jo says.

"Do I control the moon?" I think.

"I absolutely don't like it," Jo Jo says.

"I'll ask Saint Joseph about it," I think.

"The guards can see from a great distance," Jo Jo says.

Then I remember Saint Joseph himself was once in a situation very similar to ours. So I speak to him, under my breath, but very straight.

"Big Jo Jo says the moon is too bright. Can't you make it a little darker? Do you remember when you were told to take little Jesus and His mother by night into Egypt to escape Herod? Do you remember that you fled across the border exactly like us? And how Herod didn't catch you? So you should help us the same way that you got help when you were running. All we are asking is what you got yourself. Isn't that fair? You felt very happy about it when you didn't get caught. I'd like to feel happy, too."

And I pat Saint Joseph through my coat, where he is sewed in the hem.

We are going forward very slowly all the time, but still are some distance from the dike. Then once more we stop and squat in the fields. In the moonlight I can see Big Jo Jo's face all worried.

Then suddenly I am looking at Big Jo Jo's face, and I cannot see it nearly so well.

I look around and the forms of the others are not nearly so clear. And we all look up at the sky and are startled.

A kind of fog is passing across the sky and across the big full moon.

"Ah," says Big Jo Jo, like a sigh all through him. "Ah, ah, ah. It is much better now."

## *I Flee from the Communists*

And we wait a while longer, and the fog gets thicker, so that we cannot see the moon at all, and the night becomes very dark, almost to blackness. And the dike we cannot see at all.

I know that fogs sometimes come up very suddenly in the dike country of Slovakia, and especially at this time of year. That is nothing in the least unusual. However, it is true that the Lord controls the elements, too, and once He parted the Red Sea. Maybe this is one of the usual fogs that comes up. Am I somebody to say where the fog comes from?

However, through my coat I pat and I pat Saint Joseph.

And now we get ready for our try at the dike. Big Jo Jo whispers to us, "Form out into one line," and we make a horizontal line behind him. So we can all go over at once.

Now Big Jo Jo crawls up and down the line of us, giving final instructions.

"From here on, on your bellies," he says. "Crawl. Keep right down, and no sound. If you can live without breathing, do not breathe. Crawl except when you get on top of the dike. Then, do not crawl, but more roll over the dike. And roll as fast as possible."

And he stops and talks with the little children. The father will take the boy, Misko, over. The mother's brother will take the little girl, Katka. It is awful to think what a yell from these sweet ones will do to us all. Big Jo Jo pats them on the head.

"All right, little ones," he says solemnly. "Be good now."

Then he says to us all, "Now we go."

Big Jo Jo stays perhaps two yards in front of us, and when he motions, we stop. We all crawl on the belly. A snake

### *The Journey Across the Dike.*

is made for it, but we are not snakes. We crawl and we stop. Crawl and stop, at Jo Jo's signal.

Now the fog is very heavy. I look along the line and just barely through it, near to me, see the mother's brother clutching the little girl to him like a package, and her curls all tucked under a long kerchief. I pray God to quiet her little heart somehow so that she does not cry out. We crawl and stop.

Now suddenly rising up directly ahead of us, seeming nearly close enough to reach out and touch, is the dike.

We are almost upon it, in the fog, before we see it. Being so close so suddenly, it seems like a great wall. Jo Jo motions, and we lie with our faces in the wet dirt, flat in the fields we lie but for a moment. But it is like an eternity.

Now Jo Jo gives a wide signal with both hands, and in one hand I can see he has the Luger out. Then, all together, on all fours, all nineteen of us go up the dike bank.

Six or seven feet, slanting up it, crawling.

Ten feet across it, which we roll, just as Jo Jo says, my face scraping against the ground, and these ten feet seem like ten miles.

Six or seven feet down the bank on the other side, tumbling, scrambling, down.

The little ones, praise Holy Saviour, never whimper.

Now, on the other side, Jo Jo crawls fast, and we go very fast after him, and we come into a woods on the other side.

Here we rest a moment and look back at where the dike is, but we cannot see it through the fog. Big Jo Jo puts his Luger back in his pocket, and pats the children like good little puppies. Then he whispers to me.

*I Flee from the Communists*

"How goes it, Sister?"

My heart is thundering—I know he must hear it.

"It goes with God's help, Jo Jo."

"With God's help," he says. "Tell God the worst of it is over."

Then quickly we go on, through trees now instead of open fields. Little Jo Jo keeps looking into the tops of the trees with his binoculars. I get curious about this.

"Why is Little Jo Jo looking into the tops of the trees all the time? I whisper to Big Jo Jo.

"Sometimes the border guards sit up there," Big Jo Jo says impatiently. "They don't sit on the ground, Sister."

After that I look up at every tree. There are so many trees. Little Jo Jo looks keenly at all the shrubs, too. Several times I imagine I see something behind a shrub.

"Someone's sitting there!" I whisper each time to Big Jo Jo, and we stop sharply.

There is no one. Finally Big Jo Jo gets tired of my volunteer lookout.

"Sister," he says, "suppose you just leave it to us to handle this."

All the same, I am glad when we get through this grove of trees and shrubs. Then, after about a mile, very near to us, on account of the fog, before we see it, there it is—the River Morava. The border!

It lies there, big, strong, and wide with its nearly 200 yards across, the hay fields embracing it. The fields almost flat against it, so that it overflows easily, which is why we have the great dike. A river down which logs, cut from the great forests, sometimes come. The Morava, which pours its waters into the Danube, which carries these waters to



### *The Journey Across the Dike*

the Black Sea. It is an uncertain river, sometimes swollen, sometimes quiet, and always muddy—and now, bless Joseph, quiet.

We walk through the swamp to it and stand now on its muddy bank, only a yard high. Quiet, we are very grateful, and not rough, as on the night when Father Matej and the seminarian, with us first tried to escape and were turned back. Still, we can feel it throbbing below us.

Quickly Little Jo Jo pumps up the rubber boat.

Big Jo Jo helps the mother, father, and two children into the boat. Katka is now asleep in her mother's arms. Then Big Jo Jo gets in himself. Little Jo Jo gives it a shove, and it is only seconds before the little boat carrying the five of them is swallowed up in the fog. After we cannot see it we hear, for a few seconds more, the quiet splash of the paddle in the water as Big Jo Jo makes away.

From the boat making its way across, the clothesline is paid out. It seems an age of time before Little Jo Jo, on our side, starts pulling the boat back, another age before the tiny craft, empty and ghostlike, emerges out of the fog.

Now the boat is controlled by ropes on both sides of the river. Four by four, two sitting on each side of the boat, our party goes over the river, being pulled now instead of paddling, for quietness.

Finally there are only Little Jo Jo, two of the seminarians, and myself left. I have asked to be in the last trip across. I do not know why, though maybe it is that, now that I am here, I want to stay the last moment possible on my own land, for I have never left it.

Then Little Jo Jo gets in the boat. It rocks a little even on the quiet water. Then the two seminarians get in. Then I.

## *I Flee from the Communists*

Then we are moving across. Swallowed up by fog and river, so that we can see only a few feet in any direction round us. I feel the water swishing softly against the boat. Save for this, all is quiet as death itself. Everything seems full of mystery, and that crossing in the fog like a passage between two worlds.

Suddenly, like a curtain drawn back, we see new soil a few feet ahead, and the others standing on the bank, a lonely little cluster of pilgrims.

I step out of the rubber boat, and for the first time in my life I stand on strange soil. I look across at my own land, and I weep.

I cannot even see it because of the fog, but I know it is there.

## 20

### A VIENNESE TRAM

FROM the river bank Big Jo Jo leads us into a small wood nearby. There he makes us stop because he says he has something to tell us.

"At the present time," he says, "we are criminals. Every one of us. Me and everyone else. Even if you never did anything before, you're a criminal now."

He waits until we absorb this, which is quickly.

"In Slovakia, a few minutes ago, you were on your own land, where you had a right to be. If a policeman caught you, you could always—in theory anyhow—tell him you

## *A Viennese Tram*

had got lost or were looking for firewood. Here you have no excuse. You don't belong here. You have no right to be here. You are over the border. You are on Austrian soil. A slight correction, my fleeing friends—on Soviet-occupied Austrian soil."

He waits while we absorb this quickly too.

"Now, as I was explaining back in the house—if we are attacked by police, Austrian, Russian, or *any* police, scatter. Everybody for himself then. I don't want any two staying together if we are attacked. Understand! And if anybody gets caught, nobody knows anyone, nobody saw anyone before, and nobody knows where anyone comes from."

He waits, and it seems quiet as death in those woods.

"I will remain with everybody until the last minute," he says, and he means it. "That is my job. I want to lead everyone to safety. But if we are attacked, everyone has to do the best he can to save his own life, and I'm not responsible for anybody. That is the only way any lives can be saved."

By now we all understand this, hard as the words sound. We understand that it is the only practical way.

"Now listen very carefully. If we should be attacked and you should scatter and get away and find yourself alone, here is what you are to do: the first thing you are to do is to try to find your way into some town and to a church. Try to get to a priest first. If you cannot get to a priest, try getting to some old people and ask for help—the chances are great that they will help you. But whatever you do, don't go to anyone young. Understand? Whatever you do, don't go to any young person. Go to a priest or the old people. Ask them to help you to Vienna. Now, if you get to Vienna: Go to any priest in the Red zone—which is where

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you will be first. Go up to any church and ask to see the priest. Ask this priest to take you across into the U.S. zone to the American C.I.C."

"C.I.C." is a strange term to us, but it is short and simple to pronounce, even in English. To make sure, though, Big Jo Jo goes from the one to the other of us, making each of us repeat it back to him until we have it memorized.

Then Big Jo Jo makes us go through our pockets and throw away any writing or cigarettes that might have Slovak writing on them.

"Now," he says, "we have to go fast, because we are behind time."

There is considerable danger still, though nothing like the dike. On the Austrian side there is no strong border guard, since of a certainty no one is fleeing into Red Czechoslovakia. Then too, unlike Communist-ruled Czechoslovakia, Austria is only Communist-occupied, and only a part is that. The Austrian civilians mostly don't care if everybody runs away, for they do not like the Communists themselves and are not likely to turn us in even if they see us. Our main danger will be from the Russian police. Our danger altogether is far less than at the dike, though the danger will increase as we go across Soviet-occupied Austria now for the U.S. zone.

Now as we go through more woods, Jo Jo makes us walk much faster than before to make up the time we waited in the house for the two policemen to go away. We have had nothing to eat and are very hungry. One of the seminarians finds a large apple somewhere in the woods. We pass the apple along the single-file line, and each of the seventeen of us takes one small bite out of it.

## *A Viennese Tram*

I am very tired now. But when I think of my tiredness, I think how far, far worse it must be for the children, who are beginning to make little noises.

"I can't go any more, Mamicka," I can hear the little girl, Katka, who is now awake. But she must, the little one, like us all.

To quiet her, I take Katka for a while and carry her pick-a-back. After about twenty-five minutes of that, jostling through the woods, she is sound asleep on my back, and one of the men takes her. After that, as we go through the woods, she is passed from one to the other of us like a suitcase.

After about an hour of walking, Big Jo Jo tells us to stop. I think it is for a rest, but I am wrong. It is because he sees a small building, a sort of hut, in the woods ahead.

"Lie on the ground," he whispers.

While we wait he goes ahead, scouting, then he comes back.

"It's all dark inside that hut," he says, "and I don't know what it is. Anyhow, it wasn't there the last time we came through this way. We'll go around it."

So we make a wide circle to miss the hut entirely.

Through the Austrian woods we walk perhaps two hours or a little more. We are all near to exhaustion. Then, coming up ahead, we can see a town. Big Jo Jo makes us all hide behind a haystack. Then he convoys us, three or four at a time, into the town, and to a house where an Austrian lady and her son, about fifteen, let us in.

Big Jo Jo takes the mother, the two children, and myself first. Inside the house the mother collapses, and we put her on the bed and get cold towels for her head.

When we are all in the house, Big Jo Jo locks the door

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and turns to us. He speaks half between a sigh and a joy. "Well, we made it again."

And I know he has taken many, many across.

He gets some bread and some meat for us all, for the children some milk, and for the men a big jug of wine which they pass around with much happy gurgling. I drink a whole jug of water, my throat being like a desert. Then Big Jo Jo claps his hands once.

"Everybody get cleaned up!" he says. "We're going to the city. Vienna! Get the dirt off you. You're not farmers any more!"

It is quite a lot of dirt, too, from crawling at the dike. So we take turns cleaning up in the kitchen, several at a time around a big tub which the Austrian lady brings. We leave a good amount of my country in that Austrian tub.

I give Katka a good washing, her face, arms, almost all of her. For a girl four years old she looks almost unbelievably well after it all. So does Misko. What amazing children! How nice and quiet they have been, so obedient and never really crying, worn out as they are, just the little whimpering once or twice.

Katka always manages to talk while I am combing her hair, and now is no exception.

"Are we going to sleep here?"

"No," I say.

"I want to stay here and sleep. Mamicka is sleeping."

"Mamicka is awfully tired. She can't carry you any more."

"I want to stay here and sleep."

"You can't sleep any more now. A little while more, and then you can sleep."

"When do I see Grandma?" she asks.

## *A Viennese Tram*

"What?" I say. "Be still."

"When do I see Grandma? You promised when I got over to the other side I would see Grandma. I'm over to the other side and I want my grandma."

"Katka," I say. "You still have to go over one big water."

"Another one?" she says with a sharp little childish amazement. "We just went over one big one."

"This is another, much bigger. The Atlantic Ocean. Be still."

"We go over that one in our rubber boat too?"

"No, in a nice big boat just like a big house. Be still and turn around—how do you expect me to comb your hair?" I say, and she turns around. "And you don't have to crawl over anything to get to this boat."

Then I tie a rose-coloured ribbon in the combed chestnut curls. "How sweet," I think, "she looks."

"I want my doll," she says.

"Dear one," I say, "we have to go now."

"Well, let's see if she's all right," she compromises.

So we look in the leather travelling bag, and the pink doll is safe across, too. Katka takes it out and tests it to see if it still says, "Mama", which it still does. Then she puts it back.

"She looks all right," she says. "I think we had better leave her there."

Big Jo Jo is in the living-room when I come out. He looks completely different. Like a real gentleman: blue suit, blue tie, shiny city shoes, a white handkerchief sticking out of his lapel pocket and his thick black hair all combed back. He even has a gold wrist watch, which is rare indeed in our country. He looks right off the boulevard.

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"How do you like me, Sister?" he asks.

"Very nice, very nice, Jo Jo. You look like a *fesak*," I say. "A sport."

"Well, we're going to the city. You have to look decent in a city. You, too. You'd better change those trousers."

Which I do, and when I come out, I go in to see the mother. Big Jo Jo is sitting by her and giving her a little wine.

"Not much further, Mamicka," he says, and I am surprised how gentle his voice is. "And a train the rest of the way."

We stay about three-quarters of an hour in that house. Then Big Jo Jo talks to us again.

"You will leave here in groups of two and three but all keeping an eye on him," he says, pointing to the Austrian boy. "Don't talk going through the streets. Understand? And don't show surprise at anything you see, such as posters you haven't seen before in the station. No gaping around, is that clear? Pretend that you have seen everything thousands of times before. When you get on the train, sit down and pretend to be sleeping. Don't even whisper among yourselves, or your language may be heard by people who do not hear it often and so will wonder. Understand?"

He hears me talking German to the Austrian lady. "So you speak German?" he says, and he gives me Austrian money to buy four of the train tickets. The Austrian boy will buy the rest.

Outside we go in little clusters down side streets to the station. It is timed so that we get there only a little before the train comes. Now I see the reason for Big Jo Jo's worry over the time.

Aboard the train two Austrian youths of the underground



## *A Viennese Tram*

meet with' Jo Jo and mingle among us, unnoticeable and watchful. From now on we are in the hands of the Austrian underground. The other passengers on the train are mostly workers. In our seats we pretend to doze. Exhausted as we all are, it doesn't take too much pretending.

An hour and a half later dawn is coming up on a cloudy day when we arrive in Vienna.

Now again we stay in small groups, but always keeping an eye on each other. From the station we get into a subway. Then we get out and wait for a tram. A special tram, on which the Austrian youths know the conductor, who is another little part of the underground. I begin to marvel how smoothly everything is figured out and organized and timed.

Waiting for the tram, Big Jo Jo motions to us to window-shop in small groups. We look at the windows of the shops, which are not yet open, it is so early—windows full of dry goods, dishes, and all the food, and it is wonderful-looking food right now.

The tram with the conductor we have waited for comes by. This tram takes us across the line very smoothly from the Communist-occupied section of Vienna into the United States section, where we will be but temporarily before going back into the Communist zone of Austria, which surrounds Vienna. The tram takes us to a monastery.

Here Big Jo Jo turns us over to an Austrian priest and says good-bye to us. Now truly the worst of it is over, he says, and he shakes hands with everybody, and me last.

"You did pretty well, Sister," he says.

"You made me feel safe, Jo Jo," I say. "May all your future ones feel as safe, because of you. Sir, God reward

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you, Jo Jo"—and I feel like I will cry a little—"and I pray your candle in heaven is long."

He makes a slight bow and the corners of his mouth smile a little. "*Mnoho stastia*, Sister," he says. "Much luck."

Then he is gone.

I felt that God had sent this strange rough man. He was rough, but he gave you courage, for he had so much himself. He was a big one of the smugglers across. I know he smuggled people across for money, but I believe he smuggled for God, too, and God bless him in his home town of Purgatory, where he has gone on—in May 1954, after I had got to the United States, I received a letter that Big Jo Jo had been killed, a few days before Christmas of 1953, while crossing the border again.

Now, in the monastery in Vienna, I tell Father Jano, "How nice that Big Jo Jo prayed before starting out."

"Yes," says Father Jano, "even a gangster prays."

After Big Jo Jo is gone, we sit around in the monastery and get into a big discussion. Everyone says we got over safely because a sister—me—was with us, and that a nun was good luck. I say no, it was because of the children—where children are, there are always angels watching. Then they say no, there were some children on a previous trip, and the whole party got caught.

Then I tell them about the fog, and I say that the one who really has done it all is Saint Joseph—Saint Joseph with the help of Big Jo Jo.

## 21

### THE LAST HILL

WE rest in the monastery and gather strength for our final trial—the flight across Soviet-occupied Austria, then across one more border into the U.S. zone. Freedom seems much nearer now. But it is not here yet.

We go into the chapel to pray, to give thanks for the help up to now, to seek aid for the rest of our journey. The chapel is as big as a medium-sized church, much bigger than our convent chapels in Slovakia. It has stained glass, which only regular churches have in my country.

I go in with Kátka, Misko, and their mother. And all of us, including the little ones, kneel in the back seats. I give Saint Joseph a short thanks for bringing us this far, but save back my big thanks until he finishes the job.

It is a Salesian monastery, and the seminarians and Father Jano, being Salesians, feel right at home. That's what you would think, to look at our Salesians, that they had come right home. It is the first time ever that I see Father Jano really happy. Being males, he and the boys are allowed to go all over. But for women there are signs all about saying *Clausura*. Latin for "Closed". So I must sit in the big library. But of course we have the same signs in our convents for the men not to go behind.

Then at two o'clock in the afternoon we leave the monastery to continue our journey. Again we go in small groups, but keeping an eye on each other.

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Our leader, the Austrian priest, who is about fifty and smiling and good-natured, takes us to the railway station, which means we are back in the Soviet zone.

Then we are two hours on a fast train. Out of the windows of the train the land is all neat, snowy, and beautiful. Once in the distance I see what looks like a great, beautiful convent, and I long to be in it. Father Jano and I sit together on the train and pretend to sleep or read Austrian newspapers. The Austrian priest gives us all some chocolate-coated candy, which tastes very good. Once three Russian soldiers come into the train, but they do nothing. They are on the train only half an hour before they get off at another station. Finally we get off ourselves at a town called Amstetten, where a bus is waiting especially for us.

This bus is provided by the underground, and I am amazed how equipped the Austrian underground is, from special tram conductors to special buses. Soon, in this bus, we are going down lonely side roads, rough roads which bounce us all over the bus, which is going very fast. We never meet a single other car on this lonely road.

Then it is dark, and the bus slows down. The priest stands up and tells us we are in the district of Steyr and that the American zone of Austria is close.

Then the bus stops, and the priest tells us all to get out and follow him.

"Follow me quickly," he says.

In the dark, under the overcast sky, we walk across more fields. Then we are starting up a very steep hill, heavy with oaks and elms. The steepest hill, or at least it seems so to me, that I have ever been on. There is snow on the ground and the hill is very slippery. I keep slipping on the hill, the

## *The Last Hill*

soles of my shoes' being slick and worn, so that I seem to myself to be going two steps backward for every one forward.

Now is when I think I lose a little of my mind.

Suddenly it comes over me that I can go no farther. I sit down in the snow and hold on to a tree to keep from slipping back down the hill.

Then I start to do a crazy thing.

It is very cold, but I start to take my shoes off. I think, that way I can climb the hill barefooted and will not slip. I would have frozen quickly, but I do not think of this.

Then Father Jano is beside me, shaking me hard.

"Don't do that, Sister," I hear him saying.

"But Father," I say, crying. "I'm not going forward, I'm going backward . . ."

He pulls my hands away from my shoes. "Don't be dotty, Sister," he says. "Don't put on a crazy act here. It's only a little farther. Only over the hill, Sister, and it is all over . . ."

"I can't," I say. "I can't go any further, Father," and I am a little hysterical now and in some sort of a daze, and I feel I will pass out in the snow.

"The border is just over the hill," I hear him say from a great distance away. "You've made it this far. It's only a little further. Only over . . ."

"I know, Father, but I can't go. I'm sorry . . . I can't go any more . . ."

My hands, jerking away from Father Jano, are forward towards my shoes, and I am thinking hysterically. "Why is it I have to wear arch supports?" and then I hear the answer shouting in my ears, "Because the devil bit out the angel's instep," and I hear someone laughing and clapping like a

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monkey and screaming at me, "Oh, the devil bit out the angel's instep, the devil bit . . ." Then I recognize the laughing-hyena voice as Crazy Kõrnel's . . . I am all hysterical inside me, and saying wildly over and over, "I am a nun in arch supports . . . a nun in arch supports . . ." and reaching for my shoes to take them off . . .

Then, just as my hands get to my shoes, I feel two arms grab me. The arms, Father Jano's arms, pull me to my feet. They start pulling me up the hill like a sack. I feel myself being dragged between towering trees . . . I feel in my daze the one arm of the priest around me and see his other arm around one tree, then we wait there and I hear him panting, then another tree and we wait, and he pulls me up the hill, tree to tree . . .

Then we are cresting the ridge. Through my daze I hear the Austrian priest saying. "This is the border!"

I fight for my breath. But each time I take a breath it seems as though something will burst in me. And suddenly I fall down on my knees, sick, retching. Not bringing anything up, for there is very little food in me. But retching from my empty stomach. What happened to me I do not know, but looking back, I feel as if I was retching all the evil of those four months of hiding out of me, or trying to, retching it out in the prisoned land before I walked over into the land of freedom. In the dark, with Father Jano half carrying me, we walk a few hundred yards to a small village of the U.S. zone. There we get another bus. Father Jano helps me inside it. In half an hour we are in the Austrian town of Linz. I feel near to being unconscious.

Then I can make out we are walking up to a monastery. The door opens and a priest stands there, and to him the

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Austrian priest says, "I bring you guests again—from Slovakia."

And the priest throws wide his arms. And he speaks in Slovak. "*Jaj Boze vitajte!*" he says. "O God welcome! Now you are completely free."

# 22

## THE HEAVENLY FIELDS

THE priest who greeted us is a Slovak refugee himself. He is a broad, jolly man and as happy and excited as if we were his own children come back from being lost. He runs from one to the other of us hugging us and shaking our shoulders. He is bubbling, he is so happy. Then he asks many eager questions about Slovakia. The Austrian priest points at me.

"She's a sister."

The Slovak priest looks at me in my ski trousers and starts shaking with laughter.

"Is that what sisters are wearing now in Slovakia? Looks very cute."

He shoos us into the guest room of the monastery, where there is a large table in the middle of the room. Pretty soon several priests come scurrying in carrying salami and smoked ham and beef and cheeses and bread and butter and jams and

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pastry and apples and pears and big steaming pots of tea until the table is ready to collapse, and I suppose they would have killed the fatted calf if they had had one handy. We eat, and even the food in this land of freedom tastes much better, though I suppose that is our relaxed stomachs. The stomach relaxes much better if it is not expecting a policeman to pop in every minute to take you away, and this is the first time in months my stomach has achieved this condition. I eat.

The men stay happily in the monastery, which is another Salesian missionaries' monastery, and the little girl, Katka, her mother, and I are taken to a Salesian sisters' convent nearby. The sisters are very gentle and nice with us and give us two beds in a room. Katka and her mother sleep in one, and I in the other.

"I want my doll," Katka says before she goes to sleep, and I take the big doll that is like herself, out of the travelling bag, and she goes to sleep, holding it.

Perhaps it is because I am in a convent, but I wake up automatically at five-thirty in the morning, just in time to get ready for the six o'clock Mass. In the next bed Katka and her mother are sleeping very peacefully, the mother holding Katka, and Katka still holding her doll very hard.

I pull the sheets, which have slipped down, over them. Quietly I open my bag and take out my rosary and Cross and prayer book. I look at them for a while—it is the first time I have had them out since crossing the border. I tiptoe out and go into the chapel.

This is the first time since Orsula's and Ludo's that I have had Mass in a holy place, and my first not in secret since fleeing the hospital. How wonderful that I can have Mass



## *The Heavenly Fields*

again without looking over my shoulder! There are other sisters there, and it is wonderful to be amongst sisters in a chapel again, and knowing that our souls and spirits are the same, even though my clothes are still different.

I kneel and give a long thanks to Saint Joseph for everything. I ask him for just one thing more—to put me soon back into my reverend clothes.

I receive Holy Communion. You can take Holy Communion without Confession first sometimes if you have not committed any serious sin, and I feel that I haven't since I had prepared myself to die.

After Holy Communion I kneel and pray again. It is still dark outside. I do not notice that the light is starting to come through the windows until one of the Salesian sisters comes up and taps me on the shoulder.

"Sister," she says gently, "we would like it if you would come and have breakfast with us."

Usually in a convent no talking is permitted at the meals. But that morning the mother superior of the convent gives special permission to allow talking. For she can see that the sisters have dozens of questions for me waiting to pop out of their throats, and she evidently decides it will keep them from racing through breakfast if she lets them do it now.

So over the sweet buns and butter and honey and coffee I answer their many questions, which are mostly about the sisters in Slovakia and how it is with them. It is a hard thing to tell them how it is, and they are very shocked.

"They are working in *factories*?" they repeat. "*Factories*," they keep saying.

At the end Mother Superior tells the sisters to pray two

### *I Flee from the Communists*

extra prayers each day—one for the Slovak sisters; another that the same thing will not happen in Austria.

Later that morning our party of fleeing ones splits up to go different ways. The family is going to Salzburg, the rest of us to the United States camp at Wels. It is a shock to realize we have known each other only sixty hours, for our sharing makes it seem always. And especially with the little children, to whom it is difficult for me to say good-bye. Katka has her pink doll out all the time now and is holding it in her arms.

"I'm going to see Grandma soon," Katka says, "and get lots of toys."

"Yes."

"I'm going over the big water."

"Yes," I say. "The big water."

I lift her in my arms a moment, and she holds her doll with one hand and clutches me tightly around the neck with the other.

"Sister, you come with us."

"No, dear one . . ."

"Sister, you come see us?"

"Yes," I say, "*Bohs s Tebou*. (God go with you!)"

Then they are gone.

The rest of us, Father Jano, the seminarians, and myself get into the back of a covered lorry. The Slovak priest says good-bye. He has taken some pictures of the seminarians and later he sends me one of them. On the back it says, "For the everlasting memory of the 10th of January 1952, for Sister. A picture of the boys from under Tatra."

"Under Tatra" refers to anyone from Slovakia. The Tatras are the highest peaks of the Carpathian Mountains and are

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our 'country's peaks. The three peaks on the coat of arms of Czechoslovakia, with the double cross above them, represent Slovakia.

We had thought when we got across the border we would be like a bunch of chickens free on a heap of dirt, scratching around for anything we wanted. But there are a few things to be taken care of first. At Wels we are in the camp three weeks waiting to be cleared by the United States authorities. Here I receive some money from my sister who lives in Canada. The first thing I spend any of it on is some of the American drink, Coca Cola, for the seminarians and myself, the first time any of us have ever had any of this drink. We all like it at once. But later I am very surprised when I get to the United States to find Americans in the United States drinking Coca Cola. My reasoning behind this is as follows: "If the Americans have such good drinks as Coca Cola over here, what would they have in the United States itself?" So I was very surprised to discover that Americans were drinking Coca Cola in the United States, too.

Later my sister in Canada forwards something else to me—a letter from my father.

*My dear daughter,*

*You flew away to a strange place just like a lastovcka. [This is the swallow, a small dark bird with a white breast or collar, like a nun.] We don't know when you're going to return, only God Himself knows how everything will be. It is very lonely and sorrowful without you. My dear daughter, from my sore heart I am wishing you the best of everything and sending you my fatherly blessing, that the hand of God shall lead you and the eye of God shall watch you so you won't get lost. Out of the*

### *I Flee from the Communists*

*moisture of earth and the dew of heaven may God bless you so you will be kind and truthful to your heavenly groom Jesus Christ, and to the people who will take care of you on this earth. Pray for us and we're praying for you, so that after this earthly life we will be happy together in heaven where there will be nothing sorrowful and nothing crying.*

*Tato*

In the camp at Wels we are in a group of about forty refugees, mostly Slovaks in our group. There are three women—a mother, her grown daughter, and myself. For our own group of seminarians I keep myself busy mending and ironing their clothes, lending my ski trousers for them to wear as the “community trousers” while I am repairing theirs.

On Sundays Father Jano celebrates Mass on a table in the recreation room. He doesn't have his priest's clothes yet, but the Slovak priest from Linz brings him the necessary vestments, bread, and wine.

Then Father Jano preaches to us, telling us to be thankful to God that we have escaped and to pray for those who are still behind under the Communists. And he comforts us.

“Remember,” he says, “that Jesus was the first refugee, into Egypt. And He, after a while, went back to His earthly country. So you should be hopeful that someday, you too, will be able to return to yours.”

And some of us would cry a little bit.

Sometimes at night in the camp we would sing the “Exile Song” of the Slovaks, which was started in the camps by those who had crossed the border.

## *The Heavenly Fields*

Far beyond the forest  
In the quiet Tatra valley  
Lies my country, the lovely home . . .  
This corner of my birth, my native land.

Over there my mother is remembering me,  
And my dear father.  
But day after day goes slowly,  
For their daughter does not yet knock on their door.  
And mother complains—  
“How hard it is without my daughter.”

“Don’t be afraid, Mother my own.  
There will come for us the lucky hour.  
Some day I will come back  
From the far foreign country,  
Where I pray ever for my homeland.

“Mothers, when at night you’re praying,  
Think of us in exile.  
Very hard is living in the world to-day,  
But our devotion is not for nothing—  
We believe strongly, and you with us,  
That some day we will meet  
In the Tatra valley.”

One day our clearances are at an end. I say good-bye to the others and go to stay for two weeks at Bischofshofen, in a convent of the Sisters of Boromei, after Saint Karl Boromei, which is there, along with a priests’ monastery of the Society of the Divine Word. Father Jano has some friends

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there and arranges for me to stay. Bischofshofen is near to the German border. I have applied for a border crossing permit in order to go to Obernzell, in Germany, because it has the nearest convent of my order. I have not told anyone at Obernzell I am coming at all, but I figure I don't need to tell anyone, any more than I would tell anyone I am coming home. I want to be near the border so that I can hop across as soon as my permit comes through.

This convent at Bischofshofen sits on a mountain side—there is a monastery for priests and a convent for the sisters, who take care of the young boys in a school where the priests teach, cooking and sewing and washing for the boys and the priests. One of the sisters teaches the kindergarten. While waiting for my visa to Germany, I work with the sisters. Mostly I darn socks for the boys. It is a very relaxing occupation, darning socks, after fleeing from the Communists.

It is a very beautiful place, Bischofshofen. My room is a nice little room that looks out towards the high snowy peaks, down from which the cliffs of rock fall until they spread out into high stands of fir and pine. I play in the deep snow and go sleigh riding, and here at last, on this mountainside, I begin to come back to life again. And I have time to look back and think upon this remarkable thing of the underground that has brought me out, and to be grateful to it.

Still, at nights, I dream—nightmares, they are. Always the dreams are of the police being after me again. In one I dream that I get home and look at all my family and am very happy. Then suddenly I realize that the police might catch me over here again, and I start telling myself, "Why was I so stupid to come home? Now I will have to go through the

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whole thing all over again, and who is going to take me across—where will I find a leader?" And suddenly I turn from my family and start running through the fields, and I can hear the police right behind me, getting closer, closer . . . I wake up screaming. "The police are after me, the police!"

The Sisters of Boromei are standing over me.

"I am all right now," I say. "I had a dream . . .

At Bischofshofen one day I receive a letter which tells how the Communist police who came to me at the hospital found out about my work of helping people across the border. An underground group on Austria had sent a messenger with a letter for me telling of some others in Slovakia who wanted to get out and asking if I would help them. The messenger, for a reason I never learned, did not have a chance to get the letter to me himself and gave it to somebody else to deliver. This person turned the letter over to the police. That gave them me—only it didn't—but not one other, since fortunately the letter asking my help did not give the names of the ones wanting to get out or where they lived.

One day my permit to Germany comes through. Early the next morning, one of the brothers and a priest take me down the mountainside in a lorry carrying lumber to the town from a sawmill which the Missionaries of the Society of the Divine Word operates on the mountain. In the town I get on a bus. The priest goes with me on the bus as far as the German border, to the town of Freilassing. There he gives me money for a train ticket to Passau and for a bus ticket from Passau to Obernzell, and says good-bye to me.

My border crossing permit allows me to go only seven

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miles beyond the border and to stay only three days. Obernzell is over a hundred miles from Freilassing, but I reckon that if I have got by the Communist police, I am certainly not going to worry about the German police. So I just go right ahead. I think I will just scoot right across the border, headed for home in the convent, and when I get there, Mother Superior will take care about the three days, for that will be her job.

From Freilassing to Passau is over half the day on the train. I don't eat anything. The priest who brought me to Freilassing had given me 12 marks for the train ticket from Freilassing to Passau and 1 mark and 20 pfennigs more, which he said was the cost of the bus ticket from Passau to Obernzell. I have a little more money myself for my meals, but am afraid to spend it for fear the bus ticket might somehow cost more. I am taking no chances now that I am getting near to a convent again. On the train, though, a German lady gives me a piece of hard candy to eat. For most of the long ride I look out of the window and huddle up in my seat and listen to the turning of the train wheels taking me nearer and nearer. I am a little frightened that for some reason, including my seven-mile permit, they might throw me off the train. So every time the inspector comes by I pull out my ticket and show it to him. "Ja, ja," he keeps saying wearily. "I saw it."

That evening I arrive at Passau. There is no other bus that night for Obernzell. So I sleep in the station with my head on a table. Very early in the morning I get the first bus to Obernzell in the Bohemian forest of Bavaria, the home of a convent where I am to stay two years.

From Passau to Obernzell the road winds along the



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Danube—this very water, I think, will flow near my convent in Bratislava.

“Tell them I will be back one day,” I give it a message to carry.

Through the bus window I watch the sun gleaming on the river and on the snow which lies in knee-deep drifts along its banks. Then we are coming into the town.

I ask the bus driver to put me off at the stop in Obernzell that is nearest the convent. He puts me off near a pub and says people there will be able to direct me. I get out of the bus. Across the street I see a young girl, about fourteen, and I go over to ask of her, in preference to the pub. I always go to children if I get a chance, for I trust them very much. Also, usually in giving directions, they go with me instead of just pointing out.

“How do I get to the sisters living on the hill?” I say, to distinguish these sisters from the others in a hospital in that town.

And sure enough she says. “Come with me. I will take you.”

So the young girl takes me through the old, narrow and snow-banked streets. And we come to the foot of a high bank of steep steps that lead, almost ladder like, up a steep mountainside. The young girl points upward.

From here I can see only one thing: far off, at the very top of the steps, I can see the peak of a tower. Nothing more. But on the tower is a Cross which glistens in the sun and which, from the bottom, looks extremely shiny, as if it were made of some sort of gold.

“Climb those steps,” the girl says, “and you’ll be right there.”

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I start up. From above, the sun glows down warmly on me. Each step is a big piece of stone niched into the side of the mountain. I count them as I go, for they are my last steps before I am in a convent again. With each step a little more from the top comes into view. First you can see that the tower is black. Then with more steps you can see that the church below the tower is of whitest masonry. A few more—and you can see another building to the side of the church.

Then I am at the top. It is ninety-two steps.

I walk around the church and down a walk which is like a ribbon between the heavy shelves of snow on either side, and see ahead of me an oldish-white building, its roof all covered with snow. And I know this is it.

I go up and ring the bell.

A sister opens a peephole in the door and, her eye peeping through at me, she says. "What do you want?"

"I am Sister Cecilia," I say, "of the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour. The same as you."

She looks me over from bottom to top like a thing, then snaps the peephole shut, and I think, "Holy Saviour, they won't let me in even here." And I tell myself, "I will stay even if Saint Joseph himself comes to the door and tells me to get out."

Then, through the door, I can hear the Sister talking to Mother Superior, over a phone, I think, since I cannot hear Mother Superior's answer.

"There is a sort of lady out here in civilian clothes," that sister says. "She claims she is a sister. I wonder if she isn't a little out of her mind. She is wearing trousers."

For I had put them on again because of the cold in the

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mountains. Then Mother Superior herself comes to the door.

She looks at me and I at her—and suddenly we recognize each other. For she had once visited our convent in Bratislava, and I had sung a German song for her, and she had been happy to hear someone in Bratislava speaking German. I had sung for her the song called "*Himmlische Auen* (Heavenly Fields)," which goes, "As you count the stars in the sky, as many times let Your name be holy, Jesus . . . as many drops as are in the endless ocean, let Your name be holy, Jesus . . . as many flowers as are in all the fields, that many times let Your name be holy, Jesus . . ."

And now Mother Superior smiles widely and opens the door and says, "Welcome, Sister. Come into the *Himmlische Auen*."

Now as I walk into the convent, all the sisters come running down the corridor, gathering around me and chattering and looking at my trousers and feeling them between their fingers. They all follow me into Mother Superior's office, where she tells me to sit down. But I stand there, and the first thing I say is: "Mother Superior, may I have a religious habit?"

All the sisters tumble out of the office and then run back bringing me clothes like a recruit. All the parts and sizes of the habit, which they spread out all over Mother Superior's office. Some of it is too small and some too big, but I pick some that look approximately right.

Then, over my trousers, I put on the dress and hook the six hooks.

Then I put on my rosary and Cross which I get out from my bag.

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Then the cloak, and hook the seven hooks.

Then the forehead cover and tie it at the back.

Then the bonnet and tie it.

Then I hook on the collar.

Then I put on the veil.

There are no mirrors in convents, so I cannot see it. Then they take me down the hall towards a room for me, and we walk through the dining-room. And suddenly I stop, for I think I see someone I know.

Then it comes over me that I am looking in a cupboard for dishes that has a glass door which is all polished and gleaming. And I realize it is me I see, Cecilia, *Sister Cecilia*, and I stop and I look and I look though you are not supposed to look, forgive me Saint Joseph.

I looked like myself.





















